

CONTACT

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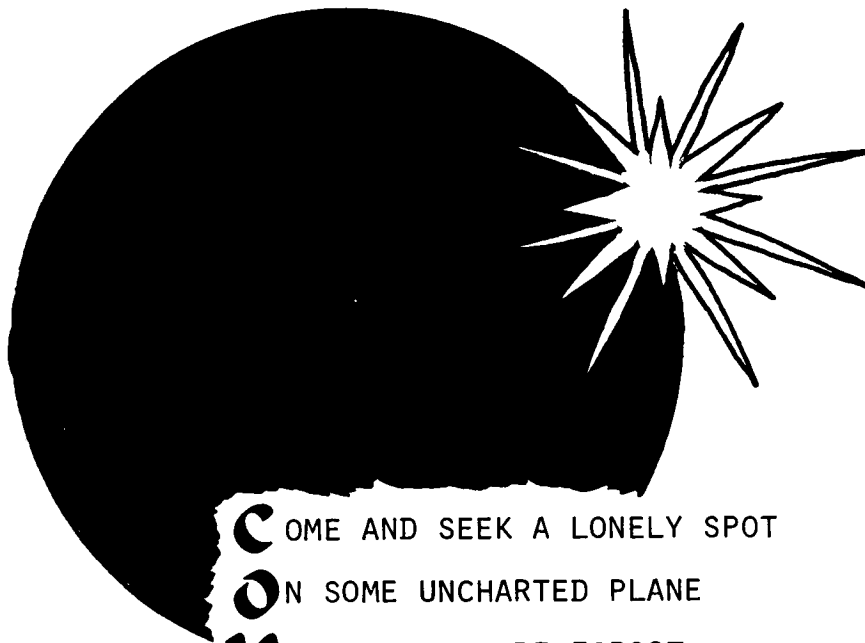
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C OME AND SEEK A LONELY SPOT
O N SOME UNCHARTED PLANE
n EVER LET IT BE FORGOT
t HAT WE'VE COME HOME AGAIN,
a ND WHEN IT SEEMS THAT ALL IS LOST
c LING TO THIS HOPE, WHAT ERE THE COST
t HAT TRUE LOVE CONQUERS PAIN.

This issue is fondly dedicated to the Baltimore Group of fans for their untiring and unending support and devotion to CONTACT from two editors very lucky to have such friends. This one's for you -- Marion, Margaret, Terri, Gerry, Suzanne, Bonnie, Carolyn, Joan and Cheryl.

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Editors' Page

RENEWING CONTACT WAS NOT EASY WHEN THE MIND WAS BURDENED WITH PAIN...

Sibyl Hancock: Contact 5/6

By the time you read this, you will have seen STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN. You will know that Spock, indeed, "lives, dies and... lives again" (?). At least that's what the Powers-That-Be are telling us, that's what the movie implies, and that's what we all want to believe. At this time, CONTACT wants to publicly congratulate the production crew and the cast, and thank them for giving us such fine performances and a motion picture of which we can all be proud.

While we anticipate the coming of STAR TREK III and await the return of Spock to Kirk, it occurs to us that although we know our favorite Vulcan will be back, Paramount knows it, even Shatner and Nimoy know it, one person who still has to endure that loss (until the next movie) is Kirk. For this reason, this issue of CONTACT is dedicated to the purpose of keeping Spock alive -- for Kirk... until Paramount makes it official.

True to this theme, nearly every story is an adventure, an exploration of the relationship between Kirk and Spock alone, away from the familiarity of the Enterprise, their crew, and their friends. Kirk and Spock face a variety of dangers and crises, emotional and physical hurts, and find comfort in each other, according to the author's fantasy... In other words, a typical issue of CONTACT! There are no Spock-dies stories, although there is one little morsel of agony for the Vulcan, just to keep the score even....

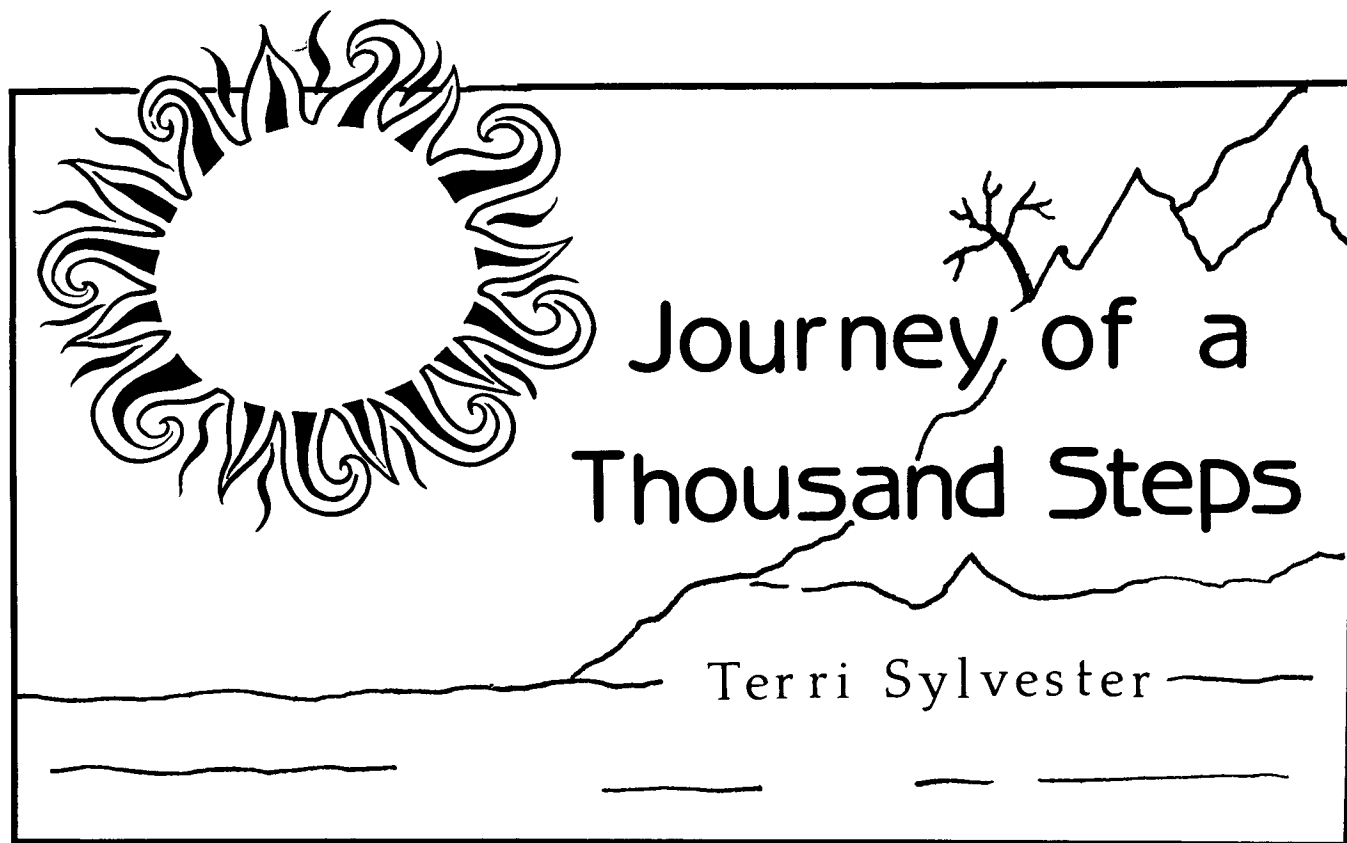
In the past, we've incorporated various friendship quotes, sprinkling them through the empty spaces. Taking a slightly different tack, in this issue you'll find another kind of quote -- Kirk/Spock quotes, culled from previous issues of this zine, lines particularly apropos in light of the new movie. Food for thought?

The preparation of CONTACT 8 was once again accomplished through the efforts of a number of people who added their talents and time to help out. We'd like to thank Ruth Breisinger for helping with the typing, Martha Bonds for proofing and help with the layout; Carolyn Venino for the use of her selectric, for always considering the machine "ours". In addition to those who help with the actual "Making of Contact", we also acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Marion McChesney, Crystal Taylor, and Martha Bonds for taking and selling zines at cons we couldn't attend. And of course, each and every contributor deserves a special note of appreciation for a job well done. Our resident calligrapher, Cheryl Bobbitt has worked her special magic again this issue, and our heartfelt thanks to Merle Decker for the just-perfect cover design.

To our readers, thanks for your continued support and the LOCs to let us know how you feel. To you we'd like to explain that because of really demanding personal schedules, CONTACT is often slow in being mailed and usually late on publication, too. We do the best we can and we do it for you, to enjoy, to share our fantasies and dreams. We'd like to apologize for these frequent but always unavoidable delays (we're not going to bore you with a list of our obligations, but ask you to take our word that we often can't be as prompt as we'd like) and we want you to know how much we appreciate the almost universal patience and understanding on your part in waiting for your zines. Together, we believe, we all have much to offer STAR TREK, and together, we'll keep the dream alive, intact, and growing....

WE ARE ONE... WE REACH,

Beverly and Nancy



Captain Kirk leaned back in his chair, gently rotating the brandy snifter in his hand. He watched his First Officer with amusement. If a Vulcan could ever be described as animated, Spock, at this moment, fitted the description. He had spent the last five minutes reading off a list of the supplies that they would pick up at the depot on Arridis I the next day. The Enterprise was returning to Alpha from a routine star mapping assignment. Arriving there she would replenish her stores and allow her crew a much needed period of leave. Spock had requested permission to spend his three days in the desert on Arridis I. It was very much like Vulcan. Kirk had granted his request and Spock had invited him to go along. He had doubts about how much pleasure he would find in spending three days on a desert trip, but Spock's pleasure at his acceptance made Kirk glad he had agreed to go. Scotty could handle things at Alpha and he could use a few days leave himself.

"We shall also need one desert resistant bubble shelter," Spock said, looking up. Seeing Kirk's amused expression, he stopped. "Have I said something humorous, Captain?"

Kirk smiled. "Not really, Spock. You just remind me of a kid with a new toy."

Spock raised one eyebrow. "I was not aware, Captain, that baby goats were provided with toys."

With a groan Kirk reached back for the pillow under his head and flung it in the direction of the Vulcan. "You know what I mean! Now get out of

here so I can get some rest before tomorrow."

Promptly at 0600 the next morning Kirk and Spock arrived at the transporter room.

"Good morning, Mr. Scott." Kirk barely stifled a yawn. "Have you contacted Arridis I?"

"Aye, Captain," Scotty replied. "They're waiting to receive you."

"Good. Mr. Scott, you have the Con. Spock and I will be back at the depot in three days, ready to beam up."

Kirk and Spock stepped up on the transporter pad. Before Scotty could activate the controls, Kirk signaled with his hand.

"Try not to get lost coming back from Alpha with those supplies, won't you, Mr. Scott. Energize."

Before Scotty could sputter a reply, the sparkles disappeared and the sound of Kirk's laughter hung in the air.

Kirk and Spock materialized inside the main supply depot on Arridis I. They stepped down from the enormous transporter pad. It had obviously been constructed to handle very large shipments to the planet's surface. Spock turned to Kirk.

"If you will wait in the controller's booth, Captain, I will see about collecting the air car and supplies I ordered."

Kirk nodded and watched Spock walk back toward the darker part of the depot. Looking around Kirk realized the depot had been built into the side of a mountain. The floor sloped gently upwards as he moved in the direction of the booth near the front of the cavern. *Must be underground storage areas as well*, he thought. The entrance to the depot was very wide and covered with a sheer plexiglass dome that gave an unobstructed view of the desert beyond. Although the temperature inside was comfortable, Kirk could see the heat waves shimmering on the other side of the dome, making the sparse vegetation appear to be made up of waving lines.

If it's that hot now, I'd hate to see it later on. With a sinking feeling, Kirk remembered he would indeed 'see it' later on.

Reaching the front he was greeted by an Ensign. Seeing the phaser and communicator on Kirk's belt, he had advised against wearing them out on the desert. The outside temperature was capable of overheating the metal and causing a bad burn. With a whoosh, an air car pulled up to the door, and

Spock climbed out. Storing their gear in back with the other supplies, they boarded the air car, strapped themselves in and closed the canopy. The car glided up to the dome and hovered there as the top began lifting. Kirk watched the two halves move away from each other. He had not seen any indication from inside that the dome was not one solid piece. As soon as there was room enough, Spock guided the car out and increased the speed, leaving the depot far behind in a matter of minutes.

The car glided above the surface of the desert almost soundlessly. Below, Kirk could see clumps of vegetation with an outcropping of rocks here and there. The shrubs and dwarf trees seemed to hug the rocks, as if seeking protection. Occasionally, small desert animals streaked across the sand and hid among the rocks.

"It's hard to imagine how the animals down there survive, Spock. I haven't seen water for a while now."

"Actually, Captain, there is water in quite a few areas of the desert. Not only in oases, but in several species of plants scattered across the desert floor, very much like your Earth's cacti."

"How far are we from the depot now?" Kirk asked, watching the graceful, gliding flight of several large birds up ahead.

"About a four or five day's march if we were on foot."

"Glad we're up here. I wouldn't much care for a long walk in this heat."

Kirk continued to watch the birds climb and dive in graceful arcs, their iridescent green plumage catching the sun, making sparkles of color on their backs. As the air car drew closer, Kirk realized they were the largest form of life he had seen yet. As if they had suddenly sensed the intruder in their domain, the flight of the birds became frenzied and gathering themselves in a tight flight pattern, they flew straight for the air car.

"My God! They're attacking the air car. Turn out of their path, Spock."

The Vulcan brought the car down and as he turned the controls, the birds hit the windshield in a suicide attempt to rout the invader. The jolt of the birds' bodies sent the nose of the car up. As the tail dipped, hitting a rock jutting out of the sea of sand below, a sickening sound of rupturing metal echoed across the desert. Blue tongues of electricity shot out of the control panel as if seeking to feed its hunger. Fighting to keep the car upright, Spock felt one blue tongue lick the back of his hand. Wobbling crazily, the car hit the ground, turned over on its right side and slid across the sand at top speed, spewing wreckage behind. At last it came to a stop against a large clump of rocks. Quiet descended on the desert once more.

Kirk was swimming up through a dark, hot sea. Something pressing on his chest was pulling him back. Slowly, he became aware of a bright light ahead coming closer. He opened his eyes to an upside down world. He was hanging from his seat, still strapped in the restraints. Raising his head, the world spun for a few seconds, coming slowly into focus. Gingerly, he moved his arms and legs; nothing seemed to hurt. Memory flooded him. The crash - where was Spock? Kirk turned his head. Spock was unconscious, his head inches from the splintered glass of the side port. Kirk reached out and his hand found warm flesh. At his touch, Spock stirred and opened his eyes.

"Are you all right?" Anxiety made Kirk's voice harsher than he had intended.

Spock shook his head to clear it. "I seem to be uninjured." Kirk's voice sounded strange and fear welled up in the Vulcan. "Are you hurt?"

"Shaken up I guess, but nothing seems to be broken. Can you get out of your seat?"

"Yes, Captain. I think so."

Spock turned sideways in his seat, released the shoulder harness, and stood up. He pushed up on the canopy and what was left of it popped out. Kirk released his harness and stood beside Spock. Together they looked out over the quiet desert. As far as they could see, the sand was littered with specks of debris.

"Let's get out and see how much damage we did." Kirk stepped out on the side of his seat and pulled himself up on the edge of the window. Bending his legs, he swung them over and dropped to the ground. Spock in turn left the air car and stood beside him. They surveyed the area. The air car had plowed through a short thicket of shrubbery and had come to rest, nose first, against two rocks forming a right angle. They walked around the car and stopped short. The entire back portion of the right side behind Spock's seat was missing. Glancing at each other, they realized it was only by some miracle or fluke of fate that Spock, too, was not a part of the wreckage left behind somewhere on the desert.

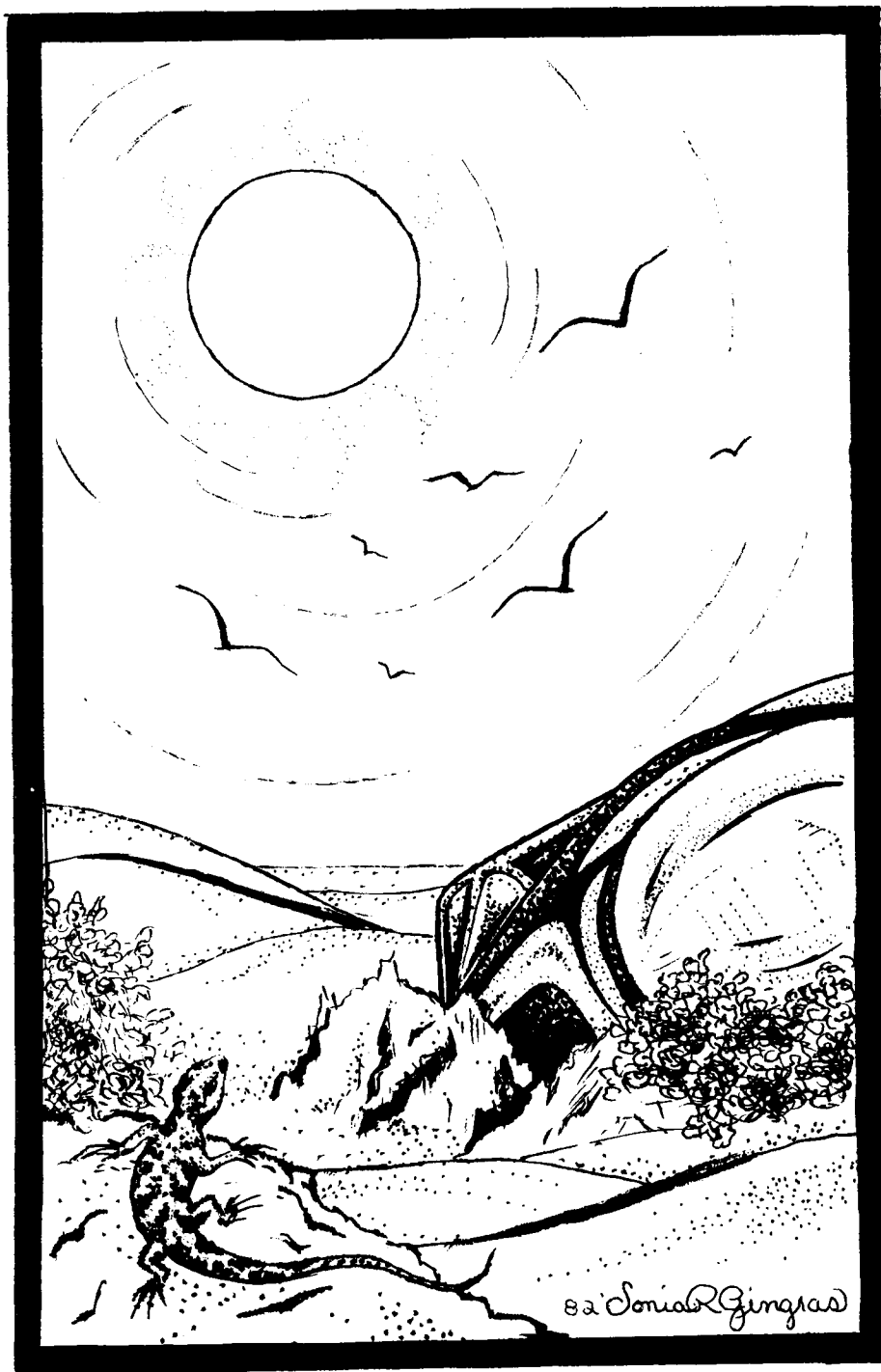
"That was too close." Kirk drew a ragged breath. "Okay," he decided finally, "let's see what we can salvage." They returned to the other side.

"I shall climb back in, Captain, and see what is left that may be of use to us."

"See if you can find the communicators, Spock. We'll have to try to contact the depot and have another car come out to pick us up."

Spock turned to Kirk. "I am afraid we will not find them; they were stored behind my seat and are most likely a part of the desert now."

"We could go back and try to find them." Kirk was grasping at straws and knew it.



"Negative. We left wreckage behind for a good ten miles or more."

Resigned, Kirk looked around. "Guess this is where we camp for the next three days. When we don't return to the depot, Soctty will come looking for us."

"In the meantime," Spock replied, "I believe we shall be quite comfortable."

They set about removing the usable supplies from the air car. Spock had climbed in and was handing out bundles to Kirk. Their food and water had escaped damage, the heat resistant tent was only a large piece of canvas now, but enough to throw over the rocks to form a shelter against the sun. Spock found the remains of one phaser that he felt could be repaired enough to be used again.

Kirk reached up for the bundle Spock held out to him. Swinging it to the ground, he heard a low, thick growl. He stopped, his head coming up, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. The hairs on his neck stirred. He was suddenly terrified, not only of the sound, but because it seemed to come from every direction. It was nowhere - it was everywhere. Then, some survival instinct turned on and he realized the growling was coming from the shrubs in front of him. All the nerves seemed to run out of Kirk's body.

From the bushes came an apparition from hell. It was a desert animal, much like a hyena. Long, thin, pointed ears lay flattened against its skull and the pale fur that covered its body was matted and dirty. The animal's eyes settled on Kirk, red, burning coals, leaking a viscous substance, like gummy tears. Foam dripped from the animal's jaws; its muzzle wrinkled back in a horrible mock grin that froze Kirk with horror. He felt his heart banging away in his chest but couldn't seem to move. His breath left him and he was vaguely aware of Spock's voice telling him not to move. He had heard about being paralyzed with fear, but had never realized it could happen with such totality. And the animal seemed to know. His mad, senseless eyes were fixed on Kirk's as he stalked forward on stiff legs.

Spock dropped to the ground from the air car. The animal's eyes flicked to the Vulcan; dismissing him, it turned back to Kirk. Kirk saw only the ugly grimace whose bite was death. The creature's back legs were tensed and for an instant their gazes locked - hazel eyes with burning red ones - and then the animal sprang for Kirk's throat. At the last moment Kirk found muscles that moved and he threw himself to the right. A searing pain fastened itself in the soft flesh between his neck and shoulder. Sharp needle-like claws raked his face and upper arm. Kirk felt his left arm go numb. The animal's teeth were snapping inches from his throat and its breath smelled rank and rotten. Kirk could feel his fingers sinking into the rough fur, trying to hold it away from him. He could smell death, terminal sickness in the hot breath that hit his face. Kirk uttered a low, feral cry of pain. Using the remaining strength in his arms, he shoved with both hands as hard as he could, flinging the animal away from him. Staggering back, Kirk was dimly aware that it was tensed to spring again, just as Spock brought the



flat rock down on its skull. The demon fell, twitched once, and lay still.

Shuddering, Kirk dropped to his knees. A red haze clouded his vision and he knew he was close to blacking out. Shaking his head, he stared at the dead beast on the ground near him. Blood flecked lips were pulled back in a grotesque parody of a grin; its eyes fastened on him, and even though clouded by death, the mad rage was clearly visible. It seemed to be laughing at him, mocking him, secure in the knowledge that Kirk would soon follow into the abyss of the devil.

Spock looked at the animal lying at his feet. It's muzzle was flecked with foam. The attack had taken place in seconds, but to Spock it had seemed to go on endlessly. Horror had made his feet seem to be mired in mud as he struggled to cross the space to Kirk. Reaching out, he touched Kirk's arm.

With a cry, the Human fell back; his heart was pounding against his ribcage. Spock dropped to his knees beside Kirk.

"Easy, Jim. The animal is dead."

Reaching for Kirk, Spock gripped both of his arms. Kirk reached up for Spock like a drowning man reaches for anything solid to cling to and indeed, at that moment, Kirk was a drowning man; but the substance cutting off his breath and sight was fear. With a soft sigh, Kirk mercifully lost consciousness.

Apain jolted Kirk awake. He was flat on the ground and Spock was leaning over him.

Spock had inspected the wounds. For the most part they were superficial. The bites on Kirk's neck and the gouges down his arm were the worst. The Vulcan worked quickly, cleaning the wounds, aware of the pain he would cause if Kirk regained consciousness before he was done. As Kirk's eyes opened, Spock gently reassured him. "Lie quietly, Jim. I will be finished shortly."

Kirk's eyes traveled over the sand. Spock watched the seeking eyes and took Kirk's hand. He knew that Kirk was tensed for yet another attack.

"Thanks. I don't know if I could have looked at it again."

Kirk felt his muscles unknot. Were it not for the pain, he could almost believe it was all a nightmare. He watched as Spock tended the wounds. The Vulcan's hands trembled and his face was furrowed with lines of concentration. Spock reached for a bandage from the medikit and Kirk suddenly panicked. Sitting up, he pushed Spock away.

"Dear God, Spock! Are you crazy? Taking care of my wounds with an open burn on your hand. If that animal was rabid, you could be infected too!"

"I have exercised the proper precautions, Jim," Spock gently replied, placing the bandage on Kirk's neck. Closing the kit, Spock sat down and faced him. Kirk could see the pain in his friend's eyes as Spock went on.

"Jim, I think we must acknowledge the fact that there is very little chance the animal was not rabid." Seeing the denial on Kirk's face, Spock rushed on. "Being bitten by an animal with rabies does not mean you will come down with the disease. With treatment, you will escape it entirely."

"You're right. Let's take one thing at a time. First you have to test it, then we'll know."

"I have no equipment with which to test it, Jim. There is, however, a primitive method that can be used."

Looking into Spock's face, Kirk remembered the ancient way man looked for the presence of rabies in animals. The brain would have to be examined for the round, black nigri bodies, by opening the skull.

"Do what you have to do, Spock." Kirk's voice shook.

Spock stood and walked back to the supplies they had removed earlier. Reaching down, Kirk saw him lift out a knife. Spock looked around and bent to pick up a large rock. Carrying them, he disappeared around the air car.

Kirk sat propped up against a rock, trying to shut out the sounds coming from the other side of the car. Several times he swallowed back the hot bile that threatened to flow into his mouth. The thought of Spock touching the animal brought the terror surging back. The sounds stopped and the silence closed in on him. Spock came around the car and crossed to Kirk.

"What did you find, Spock?" Was it...?"

Spock's reply was quiet. "There were nigri bodies in the brain, Jim. The animal was rabid."

Kirk did not fully realize until he heard the words how much he had hoped for a negative reply. Drawing a deep breath, Kirk pulled himself together.

"All right. How much time do I have to get treatment?"

Spock hesitated, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"The location of the wound makes it imperative that you get treatment as soon as possible."

"Exactly how long," pressed Kirk.

Spock looked away, then turned back. "Preferably within three days, certainly no more than three and a half days."

"Doesn't give me much time, does it?"

Kirk looked back in the direction of the wreckage.

"We obviously can't make it back to the depot. We could camp here for the three days and take the chance that the Enterprise will come looking for us. I don't like the idea of just sitting here waiting for the ship," Kirk exploded. "They may not find us in time."

"Perhaps there is another choice. We can go forward. We are three days away from Delta I, a desert colony. There is sufficient water to reach an oasis two days from here. The colony is one day beyond. They have medical personnel there to treat you."

Kirk rose to his feet and looked out across the desert. A faint spark of hope was growing.

"Can we make it, Spock?"

"It should not be too difficult, Captain, if we take precautions against the sun and heat."

The spark ignited into flame and Kirk felt energy pouring through his body.

"Let's get started then."

"We cannot travel during the hottest part of the day. The sun would bake us dry in a matter of hours. I suggest we make a shelter to keep the sun out and rest until it cools off."

Kirk nodded and walked over to the supplies, glad to be moving, expending the pent-up, nervous energy.

In a short while they had gathered the supplies they would need to take with them. There was sufficient water to last two days, ample food, a large section of the desert resistant tent, and the damaged phaser Spock had found in the wreckage. The heat from the sun had grown stronger as they worked and Kirk could feel the back of his neck burning.

"We had better make the shelter now, Captain. The sun will be at its worst for the next few hours."

Taking the remaining section of their tent, they draped it over the rocks on one side and the air car on the other. After weighting down the sections with rocks, they crawled under into the dark shade. Blocking out the sun had reduced the temperature 25 degrees, not cool by any judgment, but bearable.

"We must try to sleep, or rest, to conserve our energy. The body requires much less during sleep."

Kirk lay down on his back, every nerve twitching, every muscle aching to be up and walking, walking toward salvation.

"It's hard to lie here, Spock, and wait. I feel like jumping up and running out there."

Kirk looked at Spock and saw the worried, watchful expression. Reaching over, he placed his hand on Spock's arm.

"Don't worry, Spock. I won't. I'll rest."

The answering pressure of Spock's hand over his told him the wait would be equally as hard for Spock.

The sun beat down on the still and silent desert. The creatures that called this inferno home had long since found a place out of the sun and settled in to await the cooler hours. Kirk had fallen into a restless, dream-ridden sleep. Spock sat watching him and working on the damaged phaser. He had managed to partially repair the weapon. It could be set to kill, but his efforts to repair the setting used to stun proved futile. Occasionally Kirk would cry out in his sleep and Spock would reach over, offering reassurance with a touch. As Kirk became progressively more restless, Spock put the phaser aside and lay down next to him. Turning over, he put his arm across Kirk's chest. Kirk quieted, as if his subconscious were acknowledging the touch of love and protection. The hot winds blew across the sand as Kirk and Spock slept.

Spock walked over to the shelter where Kirk lay sleeping. He gazed down at the figure curled up in the shade, reluctant to wake Kirk from the first peaceful rest of the past hours. The desert had cooled from the searing mid-day heat. It was still hot, but bearable to humans. Spock reached down and gently shook Kirk.

"Captain, we must start for the colony."

Kirk stirred and slowly opened his eyes. For a moment he did not understand where he was. As he sat up, the events of the past hours came flooding back. He groaned and put his head down. It wasn't a dream; it had really happened. The pain in his arm and neck told him that.

"Jim," Spock urged gently, "we must start out. We will only be able to travel the last few hours of daylight and part of the night. The moon will light our way for a short while. We will rest until dawn and start out again."

Kirk struggled to his feet. His shoulder and arm were stiff; they burned and ached. Spock had assembled and packed the supplies they would need. Kirk looked at the two bundles as Spock reached to pick them up.

"Spock, I can carry my share," he snapped.

"Captain, with your shoulder wound, you would be unable to carry any additional weight."

Kirk bit back a sharp retort. Spock was right; he couldn't carry a pack. He barely felt able to walk in this heat. Instead, he asked, "Which way do we go?"

The colony is northeast from here on the other side of those ridges."

"Three days, Spock! Those hills seem so close."

"Distances are deceiving in the desert. They are in reality quiet far." With a last look around, Spock stepped away from the rocks and started off across the desert with Kirk beside him.

They had been walking for hours. The sun had finally begun to set, bringing relief from the burning heat. Kirk's neck and face felt as if they were on fire. The faint breeze carried a hint of the cooler temperatures the evening would bring. Kirk had long since given up trying to keep pace with the Vulcan and had fallen a few steps behind. Spock stopped and waited for Kirk to reach him.

"We will stop here, Captain, while I prepare something to eat."

Kirk sank to the ground, grateful to have stopped moving. Spock walked over and handed a canteen to Kirk, who took it and drank in large gulps. The water did not taste quite right to Kirk. It had an odd metallic taste in his mouth. Spreading the remnant of tent material next to Kirk, Spock gently eased him down.

"Rest, Jim. I will bring you something to eat." Kirk was too tired to argue. With a groan, he closed his eyes and was instantly asleep. Spock set about digging a shallow pit and gathering twigs and brush for a fire. When the fire was burning, he found two forked sticks which he drove into the sand on either side of the pit. Hanging a small pot on a third stick, he placed this across the two forks to make a crude spit. When the water came to a boil, he poured some into a cup and added a packet of survival rations. Stirring the thick, fragrant liquid, he sat down beside Kirk. He hated to awaken him, but he knew Kirk needed nourishment as much as rest.

"Captain, your soup is ready." Spock put the cup down and touched Kirk. There was no response. Alarmed, Spock's tone sharpened. "Wake up, Jim!"

Kirk struggled to get up. "I'm coming, Spock."

Gently, Spock eased him back. "No, Jim, we are not leaving just yet. I've brought you something to eat."

Kirk did not feel like eating, but if Spock wanted him to, he would. He took the cup and slowly sipped the warm liquid. His throat felt sore and it burned going down, but he managed to finish most of it. He felt more thirsty now than he had in the afternoon desert heat. Reaching for a canteen, he drank deeply, letting the cool liquid bathe his aching throat.

The desert breeze blew cool air across Kirk's face. Putting his head back, he said, "That feels good, doesn't it, Spock? Should be easier walking in the cool night air."

"We will be able to walk until 0300 hours, Captain. After that time the temperature falls to 25 degrees and we are not dressed to withstand the cold for long. We will stop and make a shelter for a few hours. At dawn we can start out again."

Kirk looked at Spock for a long moment and spoke sharply. "Spock, we're on a fixed time schedule. If we keep stopping to rest, we'll never make it."

Spock met his gaze. "We will make it there, Jim."

Regretting the outburst, Kirk stood and reached for Spock's hand. "Then let's get going, friend. As an old earth poet once put it, we have miles to go before we sleep."

Breaking camp had taken only a few minutes and they set out with renewed energy. The cool night air was refreshing and their pace was quicker. The bright yellow moon cast its midas touch over the desert, transforming it into a golden wonderland. That which was stark and barren by day, became inviting and comforting at night. Kirk walked along, drinking in the beauty spread out before him. Comfortable for the first time in the long day, Kirk felt hope well up within him, pushing back the horror that lurked beyond the edges of his mind.

The hours went by and little by little the desert changed. The breeze that blew past Kirk and Spock was no longer refreshing; it was now cold and chilling. Kirk found himself shivering at each gust of wind although it did not seem to cool the heat within him. His teeth chattered and goosebumps crawled across his flesh. Spock stopped and put down his pack.

"We will have to stop and shelter ourselves against the cold."

Kirk realized that the Vulcan's lips were blue and that he was visibly shaking, too. He had let himself become so immersed in his own discomfort, that he had failed to notice Spock's misery.

Silently they spread the tent material out on the ground. Lying down in the middle, they pulled one side over both of them and then the other side over that. Burrowing under, they huddled together against the cold.

Gradually they stopped shivering and began to feel the drowsiness that comes on the heels of renewed warmth. As Spock drifted toward sleep, he could feel the heat that was radiating from Kirk's body.

And so ended their first day on the desert.

The first faint pink light was climbing over the horizon as Kirk and Spock consumed a light breakfast of herb tea and a tin of biscuits. Kirk's head hurt and he was hot. When Spock had changed the dressing, the wounds - bites, his mind insisted, as if relishing the horror of it - were ugly. Food seemed to make him feel worse instead of better. Putting his cup aside, he looked out over the desert.

"Spock, how much do you know about rabies?"

"I have read some tapes on the subject, Captain. It is a virus disease of the central nervous system that causes slow destruction of that system. It was virtually eliminated in the 21st century with the perfection of the rabies vaccine."

Kirk turned to look at Spock, his eyes boring into the Vulcan. "What are my chances?"

"The colony has the vaccine to treat you. It is a simple procedure."

"Providing we reach there in time."

Spock wanted desperately to lie to Kirk, to reassure him, to tell him everything would be all right - but he could not. He owed his friend the truth, the right to know what he faced. Spock looked away, unable to watch the impact his words would have.

"The longer it is left untreated, the less chance there is of survival."

Kirk drew a long breath. "I guess we had better make that colony on schedule." He looked off in the distance at the ridges that looked so close yet remained, maddeningly, out of reach.

"All right, Spock, let's walk." Kirk's voice held a steel edge that warned he would brook no opposition.

The sun rose with a glorious burst of color, but Kirk scarcely noticed. His world was reduced to the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other. Kirk's head hurt, his shoulder and neck throbbed, and the daylight was too bright, it made his eyes hurt and water. The world was a crazy, patchwork of pain. A breeze, hotter than before, raked him with its sinister caress. The sun began to flush him. Spock had slowed his pace to match



that of Kirk. He knew they would soon have to stop, but the urgency that drove Kirk also drove him. So many miles to cover. Finally Spock halted and eased off his back pack.

"We must start to dig now, Captain. In another hour the heat will be unbearable."

"Dig what?"

"A trench, Jim, three feet deep, running from east to west. If it's aligned due east, the sun will never reach the bottom of the trench. The objective is to keep cool through the hottest part of the day. We have to conserve body fluids and avoid sunburn. Three feet below ground level the temperature can remain as much as 60 degrees cooler than the surface."

Kirk's voice rose to an uncontrollable pitch; he fought it down. "If we stop for hours, we'll never make it, Spock."

"If we do not stop, Jim, we will not last out there. How much fluid in your body can you afford to burn up getting there? That is how the desert kills."

Kirk's nerves screamed for release and he had trouble controlling his anger. Everything seemed to be blocking him, impeding his progress, even Spock. His mind roared one word at him - RUN - RUN! He fought it back and the roar became a low, insistent throb.

Kirk looked at Spock through a haze of pain. He sank to his knees. Spock removed a hand shovel from his pack and scratched the outline of the trench on the surface of the sand.

"Give me the other shovel. I can help with the digging."

Reluctantly, he handed Kirk a shovel and they began to dig.

The top four inches of sand were easy to remove, but after that, the sand was packed and heavy to lift. Kirk was tired. It took all of his concentration to lift his arms. The task freed him from the obligation to think ahead. He worked slowly, on his knees, methodically lifting the shovel. But the thought of the far away colony came relentlessly into his mind. The thought hammered away in his brain. Would time run out for him? What good was it to postpone death a few hours if they could not make it? Kirk sat back weakly against the wall of the trench. They had dug down two feet, but Kirk could dig no more. His head was spinning and his throat was full of dust. He reached for the canteen and took a few swallows. The water made his teeth ache and sent bolts of pain through his eyes. He was still thirsty, but put the canteen aside. The price in pain that the water cost him was too much.

Spock continued to dig. He watched Kirk struggle to do his share, until Spock could stand it no more. He stood and crossed to Kirk.

"Jim, I will finish the trench."

Supporting Kirk, Spock helped him climb out and sit on the edge. Kirk was close to exhaustion. Regretting his decision to let Kirk help, Spock returned to the trench to finish the remaining foot. A sense of urgency drove him - Kirk would not be able to stand the rays of the sun for very long. He had to force himself to slow down and dig slowly, to dig with less effort; he had to husband his energy if they were both to survive the desert.

When he was finished, he banked the loose sand and clay on the sides of the trench and spread the canvas over the top, leaving room at both ends for the air to circulate. After anchoring the sides with rocks, he helped Kirk to lie down. As the sun climbed in the sky, the trench amazed Kirk. If anything, he felt chilled against the dark, moist sand. He closed his eyes and tried to blank his mind. If he could sleep, the day would pass and they could begin walking again. Kirk was not really sure if he could find the strength to go on. Exhaustion overcame the questions and he fell asleep.

Spock lay awake listening to the sound of Kirk's rapid breathing. His friend was deteriorating before his eyes and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. They should be able to reach the oasis by mid-morning. From there it was only a short distance to the hills that separated them from the colony. Spock calculated the remaining miles they had to cover. There would be time, he told himself - there had to be!

The color of the sky began to change. The sun, not nearly so strong now, slanted down from a flat angle near the horizon. Spock got up slowly and scanned the desert. The faint smudge of shadow in the distance marked the oasis. He looked down at Kirk. In sleep some of the desperation had left his face, and it was almost peaceful. Spock climbed out of the trench and went to the backpack. They would have a quick meal and be on their way. As he bent to open the supplies, Kirk's voice lashed out behind him.

"Don't touch that pack, Spock!"

Startled, Spock turned to face Kirk.

"If you think you're just going to skip off and leave me here to die, you've got another guess coming. It's your fault I'm here and you're stuck with me!"

Stunned, Spock could only stare at Kirk. There was a look of raw hostility on the Human's face.

As Spock watched, realization of what he had just said washed over Kirk. The hostility was replaced by horror and tears came to his eyes.

"Damn it, Spock! What's wrong with me? How could I say those things to you?" Kirk's face crumpled. Spock crossed the space between them and gathered Kirk to him.

"I'm sorry."

"There is nothing to forgive, Jim."

Trembling, Kirk leaned against Spock. "The sun makes my head throb."

"There are pills in the medikit which should help. Sit down and I will get them for you."

Kirk sat down on the sand and watched as Spock went to the supplies. He was ashamed - and frightened at his outburst. The emotions that had surfaced confused him. Was the disease farther along than he realized - was this the beginning of madness?

The Vulcan's body was rigid; frustration and fear fought for supremacy. Kirk's attack had been unexpected, so totally out of character that it left him bewildered and anxious. Spock returned with the pill and the canteen. Swallowing was painful, but Kirk managed to get them down. Spock busied himself getting a meal together, allowing Kirk time to regain his composure. He came back with some cheese and biscuits, and sat beside Kirk.

"We have to talk, Spock. There is something I have to say and I want you to listen."

Puzzled, Spock waited for Kirk to continue.

"I don't know how far this disease has progressed, but if that outburst is any indication, I might not get the treatment in time."

"Jim, please...."

"No, let me finish. If I come down with the disease, I could be a danger to you." Kirk paused, allowing his words to hang in the air. "I want you to promise me something, Spock."

"If I can."

"I want you to promise you will...kill me if I show signs of...of becoming like that animal."

"Jim! - I cannot promise that!" Spock looked at his friend and saw the anguish, the fear, and the revulsion Kirk felt. Spock looked away. The words were wrung from his soul. "I - can - not!"

"Spock, promise me you won't let me live through that kind of hell." Kirk reached for Spock's hand as if to bind the agreement. "I can't live with the thought that I might hurt you, or anyone, if I come down with rabies. Find some way to stop me."

Spock gripped Kirk's hands. "I will find another way, Jim, but I cannot promise you that."

Kirk looked at Spock with a sad expression and said quietly, "You may change your mind on that."

Spock rose to his feet and picked up his pack to forestall any further

discussion. "We had better start, Jim, if we wish to reach the oasis by tomorrow morning."

It was a grimly determined Vulcan that started out across the sand.

The desert breeze blew tantalizing hints of the cool air which would later descend on the desert. Spock walked with a steady pace, his eyes returning time and time again to the smudge on the horizon. He knew they were covering the miles that separated them from the oasis, but it still appeared to dance away, just out of reach. Kirk had seemed to gather new energy with the tangible proof that the journey's end was now in sight. If he could make the oasis, the colony was only two hours beyond. The sun, while not as hot as it had been, was still a force capable of great damage. Strange, Kirk mused, the same sun that nurtured and sustained life could, in turn, viciously and savagely destroy that life. His shoulders ached, the back of his neck ached, as if from bearing some insupportable burden. The throbbing began again in his head, and he concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other. Long ago, as a child in Iowa, he had played a game when he had a long way to walk. He would not look off in the distance, but would concentrate on the ground before him for as long as possible. When he did look up, the place was magically closer to him. Kirk now played that child's game, but somehow the magic was gone. When he looked across the desert, the oasis remained as far away as before.

The air grew cooler. Anxiously, Spock squinted at the sun, noting its position in the sky. It soon would be setting and the chilling winds would start. They would have to stop for a short rest and something to eat. Every nerve screamed to continue the pace, but his muscles cried for relief. While in better physical shape than Kirk, Spock, too, was near his limit. He stopped, dropped his pack on the sand and sat down. Kirk joined him and they sat in silence, too weary to do more than breathe in the cooling air. After a minute or two, Spock rose to his feet.

"Rest for a while, Jim. I will prepare something to eat."

Kirk made no answer. With dull eyes, he watched Spock gather material for a fire. His headache grew stronger. He was sick of being miserable, of pain, nausea, and thirst. Wearily, he drew his legs up and leaned his head against his knees.

A touch on Kirk's shoulder awoke him. Spock was kneeling in front of him, holding out a cup of hot tea. Kirk reached for it, curling his fingers around its warmth. His hands were cold in spite of the fever he knew he was running. When Spock sat down beside him, Kirk turned and could see the toll the desert was taking on his friend. There were lines of fatigue deeply etched on Spock's face. The hollows of his cheeks were sunken and bruised looking. Kirk's mind recoiled from the knowledge. *It hurts to see Spock looking like this.*

The sun began to set, sending purple shadows snaking across the sand. The sky was a spectacular display of coral, orange, and gold. Kirk, watching the changing colors, knew if he survived he would never again watch another sunset with quite the same enjoyment as before. He now knew the sun as an enemy, in a coat of many colors.

After eating a light meal, Kirk and Spock set out once more toward the oasis. The moon rose lighting their way across the sand. The night before it had made the desert appear to be touched with gold. Tonight it was gray and sinister to Kirk. He knew the bitter cold that would follow, cold that would force them to stop, cold that would eat up precious time while they waited for it to pass.

Kirk unconsciously began to walk faster, as if to compensate for the time they would later lose. Spock watched as Kirk increased his pace. He reached out to draw Kirk back, slow him down; he knew Kirk did not have the energy to waste - but something in Kirk's stride spoke of command. This was, for a few moments, the Captain of the Enterprise and not a man on the edge of collapse. Spock drew his hand back and followed after Kirk.

The swift pace with which Kirk had started soon slowed to a walk and Spock was once more ahead of him. The desert temperature was dropping and the cold air caught Kirk's damp shirt, turning it to ice. He was burning up and freezing at the same time. His legs ached, and each step sent the ache coursing through his body. The horizon stretched before him through a red haze, and the outskirts of the oasis were gradually emerging from the distance. Suddenly, he stopped, realizing what he was seeing.

"Spock." The shout Kirk had intended came out as a harsh rasp forced past a parched throat. "We're there. We made it!"

Spock turned to see Kirk coming at him, half staggering, half running. He stepped in front of Kirk and stopped him by putting his arms around him.

"No, Jim, not yet, but soon."

Struggling, Kirk tried to break Spock's hold. He was almost incoherent.

"Let me go, Spock. That's an order! You won't keep me from getting there."

Spock hesitated, then tightened his hold on Kirk. Their eyes locked for an instant. Kirk's body arched and began to shake. His knees gave way and he slipped to the ground, bringing Spock down with him. Spock gently cradled Kirk's head as spasms racked his body. His legs and arms shook and his jaws clamped together. The spasms diminished, only to be replaced by chills and perspiration. Spock eased Kirk's head to the sand and reached for the canvas in his backpack. Stretching it out on the ground, he lifted his

friend and placed him in the middle. Pulling one side over Kirk's quivering form, he lay down next to him and pulled the other side over both of them. Drawing him close, Spock let the warmth flow from his body to Kirk's. For one of the few times in his life, Spock felt helpless. He longed to ease his friend's pain, but there was little he could do except hold him and let Kirk know he was there.

Gradually the agony passed and Kirk lay in the grip of total exhaustion. Spock left the covering and went to the supplies. Taking two pills from the medikit, he crushed them in a cup. Picking up the canteen, he returned to sit beside Kirk. The weight told him there was very little water left. He poured just enough to dissolve the powder. Capping the canteen, he knew only one ration remained for the morning. They would need the water the oasis held by mid-day.

Lifting Kirk's body, he cradled him in one arm and began to spoon the medicine into Kirk's mouth.

It was a slow process. Kirk's throat was swollen and it was difficult to swallow even the small amounts Spock fed him. When it was finished, Spock eased Kirk down and returned the canteen and cup to his pack.

With difficulty, Kirk drew air into his lungs and heard the pounding of his heart which pumped the burning blood throughout his body.

"Oh God," he whispered, curling slowly in upon himself.

Spock slipped back under the canvas and wrapped himself around Kirk's body. Only when he heard the relaxed breathing that told him Kirk slept, only then did he permit himself the luxury of sleep - and so ended their second day in the hostile desert.

Kirk swam through thick, hot air to consciousness, into a light-filled web of panic. He had dreamed of thousands of drops of water in a vast flowing river. Struggling, he sat up and opened his eyes. Spock sat on the sand beside him.

"Good morning, Jim."

"It's morning, anyway, Spock."

He looked past Spock at the horizon. He closed his eyes and looked again. It was real; he hadn't imagined it! Reading Kirk's face, Spock said, "Yes, Jim, the oasis." It was closer in the daylight than it had appeared in the night. Spock stood.

"It should take us two hours to reach it."

Kirk rose to his feet. A wave of dizziness threatened him, but he shook his head and it retreated.

"We will finish the water before we leave." Spock handed him the cup. "Our bodies will need the moisture for these two hours."

Kirk took the cup and sipped at the water; it tasted terrible and his throat was raw, but he managed to finish it. Spock folded the canvas and put it back in the pack. The two friends looked at each other for a long moment. Black eyes mirrored the flash of hope in the hazel ones. Kirk broke the silence.

"Let's go, Spock."

Together they set off across the last remaining miles of open angry desert.

The sun rose higher in the sky and the air grew warmer. They were closing the distance to the oasis. Kirk glanced up at the blazing disc. The enemy was preparing its final assault on the puny beings far below. But this time they would win; they would reach shade and water before the sun grew strong enough. Kirk's left arm had begun its insistent throbbing again and he longed to soak it in cool flowing water. Soon, he promised himself, soon he could soak his whole burning body.

Spock, too, was reaching his limit of endurance. His body clamored for moisture. He had not had any water since yesterday. After mixing the medicine last evening, there had remained less than a cup, which he had given to Kirk this morning. The chills and fever had depleted Kirk's body and it had been essential to replace the water if he were to go on. Spock kept his eyes on the oasis, calculating and recalculating the distance left. They would make it. They were tiny specks in the cosmos of sand, but they would survive.

The last hundred yards to the oasis seemed to go on forever. The sand trapped their feet as if reluctant to let them escape. Small branches hidden in the sand raised up to trip them. The desert was not used to losing. Most of those who came here to do battle remained forever. The sun was master and the desert his jealous mistress.

Stumbling, Kirk and Spock reached the first shade. Instantly the air around them cooled. They had reached a sanctuary where the sun did not rule. They stood next to a tree and leaned against its trunk. It was the first tall living thing they had seen since the crash. The wind rustling the leaves overhead sounded sweet to ears accustomed to desert silence. The dense shade was soothing to eyes burned dry by the sun's reflected glare.

As their breathing eased, the sound of splashing water reached their ears. Turning toward the sound, they saw a well worn path leading toward the center of the oasis. Slowly, they made their way along the grass by the side. The feel of the soft, yielding grass under their feet was almost

sensual. Kirk's eyes drank in the varying shades of green. If the desert he had left was a burning hell, this would qualify as heaven. Spock had gone down the path and around the bend. Kirk heard him call out.

"Jim, here."

Doing his best to hurry, Kirk followed Spock around the dense clump of trees. The sight that greeted him brought tears to his eyes.

In front was an irregularly shaped pond of clear, sparkling water. It was heavily ringed by trees, from whose branches hung red fruit. The leaves formed a canopy over the water and a gentled sun dappled the surface of the pond. In the center jutted a large black rock, about eight feet tall. It had been polished to a smooth, glass-like shine by countless eons of water spilling out from the top and cascading down its sides. The sound of falling water brought a rush of elation welling up in Kirk. Turning, he threw his good arm around Spock and leaned against him.

"We made it, Spock, we made it!"

Spock raised his arms and encircled Kirk.

"Yes, Jim, we made it."

Together they walked to the edge of the pond. Spock dropped to his knees and put his hands into the water. It was cool and inviting. Lowering his head, he cupped his hands and drank deeply, slaking the thirst of his dehydrated body. Splashing his face and neck, he looked up.

Kirk knelt and stretched his good arm out toward the pool. As he bent to drink, a picture of the animal's mad, mocking grin flashed before his eyes. Some long forgotten piece of information danced in his mind. *A victim of rabies fears the water.* He sat back on his heels clenching his fist. He looked as if he had seen a ghost.

"What is the matter, Jim?"

"I can't touch it."

Alarm washed through Spock. "Try. You must have water."

Kirk leaned forward once more, extending his shaking hand toward the surface. Inches from the rippling water he jerked his hand back.

"I can't do it."

"You must. This fear of the water is unfounded. You can overcome it. Without water you will never make the colony."

Kirk knew Spock was right. Driving everything else from his mind, he thought only of the colony and the treatment that it promised. Gathering the tattered remnants of his resolve, he lowered his fingers. The touch of the cool water rushed over him and he released the air from his lungs, unconscious of the fact that he had been holding his breath. With a cry of joy he

lowered his head and drank, the pain in his throat forgotten for the moment.

Finally, thirst receded and they sank back against some nearby trees. The demands of his body assuaged, Spock turned his thoughts again to Kirk's condition. His wounds would have to be cleaned and redressed. There had been very little water out on the desert with which to do more than superficial care. Soaking in the pool would serve two purposes; it might bring Kirk's temperature down and cleanse the bites.

Kirk needed no persuasion. The thought of lying down in the cool water was one his feverish brain leaped at. Spock helped him to remove his shirt and carefully peeled away the dressings. The sight of the puffy, inflamed wounds made him wince. They were definitely infected. Kirk's shoulder and upper arm were swollen. As he bent to pull Kirk's boots off, he thought of the colony just scant hours away. They would have time to rest here for a while. Spock walked over to his pack and removed the canteens; they would need filling. He turned in time to see Kirk step out of the rest of his clothes and walk to the edge of the pool. Spock's breath caught in his throat. He had not realized fully the effect of the high fever on Kirk. The Human's flesh hung loosely around his ribs. The swelling on the left shoulder only accented the loss of body weight.

Kirk stepped into the water and sat down in the shallow part. Easing his body down, he rested his head on the grassy edge and stretched out. The water enveloped him, caressing him with its cool fingers. He let out a deep sigh.

"Spock, this feels wonderful. Come on in. You could use a good soaking, too."

"In a moment."

Kirk watched Spock gather up their clothes and walk to the edge of the pond. He was suddenly aware of the amount of damage the desert had inflicted upon his friend. His tall, commanding First Officer was now a gaunt figure of exhaustion. *Thank God the colony is nearby. Spock will need rest and good food.*

Spock placed the canteen at the edge and walked into the water, taking the clothes with him. He swished them up and down several times to clean out the sand. Then he stretched out beside Kirk. Silently they lay submerged, lulled by the sound of the falling water.

The cool water had allowed Kirk a brief respite in his battle with pain. His shoulder and arm were now numb. His raging fever was temporarily reduced to a buzzing heat and he lay on the grass, drying in the gentle breeze. He knew he should get up and dress, but the relief that the oasis had brought left him unable to summon the energy to move. They were close to the end of their ordeal. Two hours beyond lay the sand dunes which separated them from the colony. A short climb and everything they needed would lay at their feet - medical treatment, shelter from the heat; and they would be able to

call the ship. Kirk longed for the cool, dark expanse of the stars, for the security of the Enterprise, where blistering heat and numbing cold could not reach out to him with their greedy fingers.

Slowly Kirk sat up. His clothes were neatly folded next to him. Reaching for his trousers, he pulled them on over his feet. Standing, he eased them up the rest of the way. Small warning shocks of pain shot up his arm, shattering his small illusion of well-being. He looked up to see Spock standing at his side.

"Let me put a bandage on your shoulder before you finish dressing."

Kirk sat back down on the grass as Spock knelt and opened the case.

"This may hurt, Jim. I will be as careful as possible."

Kirk had an insane urge to laugh. What was one more hurt in the midst of a sea of misery? As Spock reached out to smooth the salve over the wounds, Kirk knew how wrong he had been. It was not one small hurt, but, rather the overture to agony. His shoulder and arm came to life with a thrust of pain that threatened his equilibrium. A groan escaped his lips. Spock drew his hand back at the sound. His face mirrored the pain Kirk was feeling. For Spock it was not a pain of the flesh, but possibly a greater one, that of causing a loved one to suffer.

"It is almost over, Jim."

Gently Spock reached out and covered the wounds with a dressing and sprayed a shield over the gauze. Slowly the pain subsided to a tolerable level and Kirk drew a deep breath.

"I am sorry. It was necessary to apply an antibiotic salve."

Kirk looked at him with a ghost of a smile. "What are you sorry for, Spock? For trying to keep me alive to reach the colony. That hardly warrants an apology."

Kirk reached for his boots and, using his good arm, pulled them on.

"If you'll help me with my shirt, Spock, we can get going."

The canteens were filled and put away. Everything was ready for their departure. Kirk and Spock stood quietly near the pond, reluctant to leave the haven they had found. Kirk broke the silence.

"We'd better get started, Spock. If we don't leave now, I may not want to go at all."

Spock bent and lifted the backpack.

"It will be only a two-hour walk to the foot of the hills. We will be

traveling in the last of the heat, but it will be bearable."

They walked around the pond to the path that picked up on the other side. As they walked along, Kirk drank in the sight of the varying shades of green and the bright spots of color added by the flowers and fruits which grew in scattered abandon. He dreaded leaving this place of peace and comfort. The enemy would be waiting at the edge of the oasis, its burning eye searching, knowing he would have to brave the gauntlet of heat, if he were to reach the colony.

Ahead they would see the thinning of the trees and the grass underfoot was mixed with sand. As they reached the edge of the oasis, the brightness of the desert beyond momentarily blinded them. Waves of heated air touched them and Kirk's heart sank. Far in the distance he could see the hills they must gain. Kirk and Spock looked at each other, then turning, they stepped out onto the burning sand.

The heat that assailed them was staggering. It was as if they had stepped into the mouth of hell. Kirk shielded his eyes and lifted them toward the sun; it seemed to be mocking him, warning him this time it would be victorious. The merciless, orange globe had miles to wreak its havoc on the hapless human below. Kirk shifted his gaze to the horizon at the hills. He felt a raging hatred well up in him. It was the key to survival and he made no effort to resist it. It was necessary to defeat the enemy and he exulted in the feeling.

Kirk and Spock struggled across the burning sand. They had been walking for over an hour and the distant hills grew closer. Stopping only for a few mouthfuls of water, they drank in silence, standing, too parched for conversation. It was an effort to breathe in the hot, dry air.

Kirk's fever had intensified again, joining forces with the sun, slowing him down. He continued on, one measured advancement after the last, the goal fixed in the dwindling core of his consciousness.

With a sick feeling, Spock watched his friend's struggle. The sun had ravaged him as well, but he felt it to a much lesser degree; he did not have the added pain and fever of an injury. He did not attempt to stop Kirk for a short rest; the same urgency drove him as well. Time was growing short and there would be a need to rest before making the climb. They would use almost all of the remaining margin getting up over the ridge.

Rich light streamed across the desert, its color too bright; it made Kirk's head swim and his eyes hurt. Thoughts floated like butterflies and he couldn't hold on to them. Something brushed against his leg, focusing his

attention to the side. With surprise, he realized it was a clump of brush, its tenacious roots clinging to the sand, resisting the hot wind that blew in an effort to dislodge it from its anchor. Raising his eyes, he saw that Spock had come to a stop ahead. Beyond, Kirk saw the gentle rise of the hills, with clumps of randomly growing brush clustered at their base.

"We have arrived, Jim." Spock's voice was ragged. Wearily, he sank to the ground.

Kirk took the last remaining steps and dropped down beside him. Shades of lavender and lilac suffused the distance. The sun was retreating, conceding defeat for a while. The wind brought faint, cool tentacles of air that promised relief. Kirk looked up at the hill before him. It rose gradually in gentle, involuted contours. What had appeared to be sand from a distance, was in reality, a hard packed, clay-like surface.

"Doesn't look too hard to climb, Spock."

Spock surveyed the hill. "It can be managed. At any rate, going around the range would take 2.5 days. Our only choice is to go up."

"Then let's get started."

Kirk began the struggle to rise to his feet. Wearily, Spock reached up and drew Kirk back.

"We need to have some water. We are both too tired to start at this moment."

Kirk shook off Spock's hand. "We're too close to stop now."

"We would accomplish nothing if we were to collapse half way up."

Kirk slumped. "You're right, but it's hard to wait when there's so little left to go."

"I know, Jim. It will only be for another half hour. By then the temperature will be cooler and we will make better progress."

Spock handed a canteen to Kirk.

"Drink as much as you can. We will have all we need at the colony."

Kirk brought the canteen to his lips. He was reluctant to drink, reluctant to experience the pain he knew would follow. But his body was parched and he needed the liquid. As the water flowed into his mouth, he felt his throat close. Pain shot through his head and he gagged. The water spilled out, running down his chin as he doubled over. He felt Spock's arm come across his shoulder, supporting him as the dry retching began. His stomach rebelled; it was being asked to give up what it did not contain. Slowly, the spasms subsided and from afar he could hear Spock urging him.

"Try again, Jim. Take small sips. You must replace the moisture in your body."

Choking, Kirk replied. "I can't, Spock."

"I know it hurts, but you must! The climb and the sun will drain your body of its remaining fluid. You need to have enough to replenish the tissues."

Kirk felt the canteen against his lips and began to sip the water.

In the half hour they had rested at the base of the hills, the mid-afternoon sun had lost some of its strength. They were still hot, but a stray cool breeze helped ease their discomfort. Spock rose to his feet.

"We can start now. In a short while the sun will set and we can make good time."

Spock reached down and helped Kirk to his feet. Kirk's knees were wobbly and he felt drained. They faced a gradual upward climb. It was a shallow slope, but it extended for miles and they could see nothing but sky above it. From somewhere deep within Kirk could feel the adrenalin coursing through his body, lending him strength. It was the elixir of life that comes to each man in his deepest hour of need.

"Tonight we'll sleep in a real bed. I can almost feel it. No more cold and no more sand."

They started off, climbing diagonally toward the top. The ground underfoot was firm and rough enough for their boots to find purchase. Although the terrain was easy to walk on, the climb sapped them and they stopped every ten minutes to catch their breath. Spock stood silent, listening, but the only sound he heard was the eerie whistling of the wind around them.

Kirk could feel the sun beating down on his back, taking one last shot at him. *Do your worst. You're licked and you know it.*

The top was in sight - he homed in on a jagged rock pointing its spiny finger at the sky. A hundred feet, seventy-five, fifty. Kirk found himself taking faster steps, overtaking and passing Spock.

"The top, Spock, we're there!"

Gaining the pinnacle, Kirk hobbled across the flat surface to the other edge.

"Hello!...Hell!....."

The words died in his throat. He stood then, stunned, as Spock caught up with him. Below them, nestled in close to the base of the hill lay the colony...or what was left of it. What had been a thriving cluster of plexiglass domes where people lived and worked was now a shattered wreck with

no signs of life. Upended domes exposed scattered supplies and destroyed equipment to the ravages of the sun. Other domes, their sides smashed in, were half filled with sand; the desert was reclaiming her own. It was as if some heedless giant had stepped over the hill and squashed the colony underfoot.

Kirk's fever-racked brain rebelled at the sight below. He could feel the insane laughter welling up inside and spilling out. Through the roaring in his ears he could hear Spock calling his name.

"Jim, stop! Stop it!"

Kirk could feel Spock's hands shaking him, but he was powerless to respond. A stinging slap rocked the Human's head back and abruptly the sounds ceased. His vision cleared. He met Spock's eyes and saw the look of terror in them. Kirk drew a deep breath and pulled away.

"Let go of me, Spock. I'm all right now." The voice was tortured. Kirk looked up at the sun and his face slowly became a twisted, ugly mask of fury. He raised a fist high above his head as though it held a vengeful sword.

"You've won, you bastard!" he screamed. Turning his back on the enemy, he sank to his knees and his body shook. The threat of death had never frightened him before. It was an ever present possibility in the life of a starship Captain. To die among his beloved stars had somehow seemed a fitting end. But to die at the hands of a mad animal, under a mocking sun, was an ignominious defeat.

"Dear God," he whispered as he dropped down on the sand.

Kirk lay on the sand, unmoving, oblivious to the final assault of the sun, or the cooling winds that followed. Over and over in his brain played the same scenario. The animal's leap, its crazed eyes, but in Kirk's imagination the animal wore his face. It was, to him, a glimpse of the future.

Only his tormented face and the rise and fall of his chest told Spock that Kirk was still alive. Spock's touch had invoked no response and he sat near Kirk, frantically reviewing their remaining options. Another colony: they were few on Arridis I, and too far distant; the oasis: he doubted if Kirk could - or would - make it back, and water was not their immediate need; wait for rescue: uncertain and probably not soon enough. Spock's mind swiftly reviewed the possibilities and discarded them, one by one. He felt his logic deserting him. Logic played no part in this nightmare world. Spock's frustration grew. Anger welled up in him and he desperately sought another alternative. There had to be an answer, but the crushing disappointment made coherent thought almost impossible. Both men were still, each sunk in his own private hell.

The sun touched the horizon and tipped over. The desert was bathed in a rosy glow and the brush at the base of the hills stood out in black relief. Kirk sat up and watched the final salute of the sun. Over the hours he had come to a decision, evolved a plan, and if it worked, the enemy would find no victim when it came charging over the rim of the planet in the morning. He looked over at Spock engrossed in a map before him. Now and then Spock looked at the sky and bent to mark a spot on the chart. Kirk stared at his friend with anguish in his heart. What he had to do would agonize the Vulcan and Kirk prayed Spock would understand and forgive him after - but there was no other way. He closed his eyes tight; he had to fasten his will like steel bands to contain his emotions. He had to drive fear and pain from his mind. When he looked at Spock again, his eyes were dead.

"Are you praying to your Vulcan gods, Spock? Looking for salvation in the stars perhaps." Kirk's tone was deliberately mocking, his voice tight with the resolve he would need if he were to be successful.

Spock stiffened and turned.

"Give it up, Spock. There are no more escapes for us. You and I have used up our quota of miracles. We're going to die here. First me, then you."

"Jim, please - don't give up hope."

"Hope!" Kirk laughed harshly. "Vulcans don't hope; they use logic, don't they? Well, let's see some of your famous logic now!"

Spock sat silent, stunned, in the face of his friend's onslaught. Yet at least Kirk was now talking, reacting, not lying still and mute.

"You know, Spock, I'll have it easier than you. I won't have to sit and watch you die, the way you'll watch me."

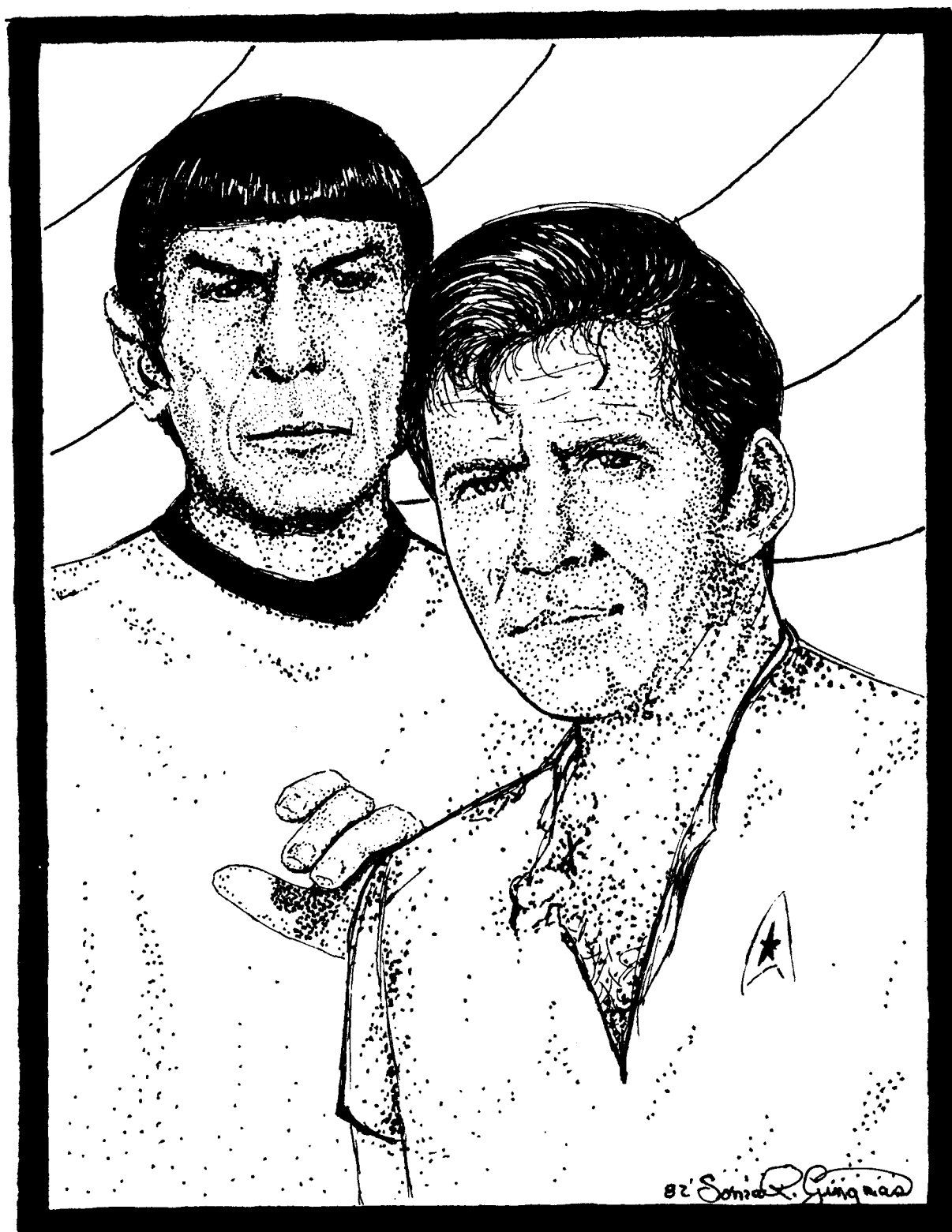
Spock winced at the words. "We will find a way to contact the ship."

"Of course we will, Spock." Kirk's face wore a sneer. "Maybe we can use smoke signals or mirrors to flash a message."

"The Enterprise will look for us when we fail to return to the depot."

"Yes, they will look for us, but what will they find. A mad animal that was once their Captain, who has now attacked and probably killed, their First Officer. Would you give them that final memory to carry?"

The image that Kirk's words painted hit Spock like a blow. Relentlessly, Kirk went on.



"Do you remember what I asked you to promise back there?"

Kirk's plea came to his mind. *"I want you to promise to kill me."* Spock shuddered. *Never. I cannot!* his mind responded and scurried away, to seek a means of escape.

"NO!" the word exploded out of Spock as he rose to his feet facing Kirk.

"I told you then you might have cause to change your mind."

"I have not changed my mind." Spock began to pace.

"You'd rather watch me suffer and die, is that it?" Kirk went on relentlessly.

"Jim - don't, please." Spock was nearing the end of his control. His nerves were quivering. The torrent of words pouring forth from the Human's lips brought fresh pain as Kirk continued to hammer away at him. He had to end this confrontation and give them both a measure of peace. Almost instinctively, Spock reached out to Kirk's neck and pressed. At his touch, Kirk's body jerked, as if an electric current was passing through him. A scream tore from his throat. Horrified, Spock watched as his friend rolled on the ground in pain. He looked down at his hands. The relief he had intended had brought agony instead. He ran to Kirk and gathered him in his arms, holding him tightly as the pain receded.

For long moments, Kirk allowed himself the luxury of his final closeness to Spock. Then, gathering his remaining strength and resolve, he savagely pushed Spock away.

Caught off guard, Spock went sprawling backward, landing on his side next to the pack. He looked up to see Kirk crouched down on one knee facing him. The Human bore the look of a trapped animal.

Kirk gritted his teeth and forced his face into a mask of rage. He needed to summon what cleverness he had left.

"What now, Vulcan? Your famous nerve pinch doesn't work when it's up against rabies. What will you do when I'm no longer in control - and don't delude yourself - that time is very near. How will you defend yourself when the madness takes over?" Kirk's eyes were unnaturally bright and his lips drew back over his teeth.

"I will go off in the desert." Spock's mind siezed on any thought to forestall the suggestion he knew Kirk would repeat.

"Oh, would you now, Spock. You'd just go off and leave me here to die alone."

"I cannot do what you ask!" Spock found it difficult to speak, his heart was beating too loudly.

Kirk crouched before him, tensed, with his arms held out, like an animal within striking distance of its prey.

"If you can't do it for yourself, do it for me."

The sound of Kirk's voice and the desperation in his words sent chills coursing up Spock's spine, and he made his decision. The man crouching across from him bore no resemblance to his friend and Captain. He wore the look of a demented creature.

From somewhere deep within Spock, in the depths of ancient Vulcan fears, the age-old revulsion for something gone mad surfaced. With a will of its own, his hand reached into the pack and found the phaser. With a savage cry, the Human moved toward the Vulcan - as Spock drew the weapon and aimed it at Kirk. For a brief moment, their eyes met. In Kirk's triumphant gleam, Spock could suddenly read his plan. He opened his hand and the phaser fell to the ground. Spock had almost been taken in by Kirk - tricked into firing. He had come so close to destroying the one person in the universe who mattered most to him. Spock watched as the realization of defeat extinguished the light in Kirk's eyes, turning them dull with despair. Spock moved, reaching out with his heart and his arms, to enfold Kirk. Time had nearly run out and they clung, needing the strength the other could give. Fear was a tangible, physical presence and they sought consolation in touch, resolving to meet, to accept, to share the inevitable conclusion.

All sensation seemed to drain from their bodies and they floated, exhausted, losing all sense of reality, till they were drawn back by an awareness of something intruding, claiming their attention, demanding recognition. They had no time to identify it, to give it a name before - the sparkles took them.

Kirk sat in the command chair, its enveloping arms welcoming him back. He was once more where he belonged; the one place in the universe that was truly his. It had been a close call.

The Delta colony they had struggled to reach had been destroyed by a sandspout. A hurried radio communication, received by the depot, had informed the authorities that all personnel were being evacuated to the Tarsus colony, one hundred miles to the west. Entering orbit around Arridis I, the Enterprise had been requested to verify that all personnel had been removed. Arriving at the colony area, their sensors picked up two life forms and they had beamed them aboard.

Quickly summoned to the transporter room, a startled McCoy had immediately ascertained the Captain's critical condition and rushed him to sickbay. The vaccine had worked and although still weak after several days, Kirk had insisted on returning to duty. He had come close to losing it all.

The quietly efficient way his crew went about their tasks as they prepared to leave orbit made his ordeal in the desert seem like a half-forgotten nightmare.

"Take us out, Mr. Sulu. Impulse power."

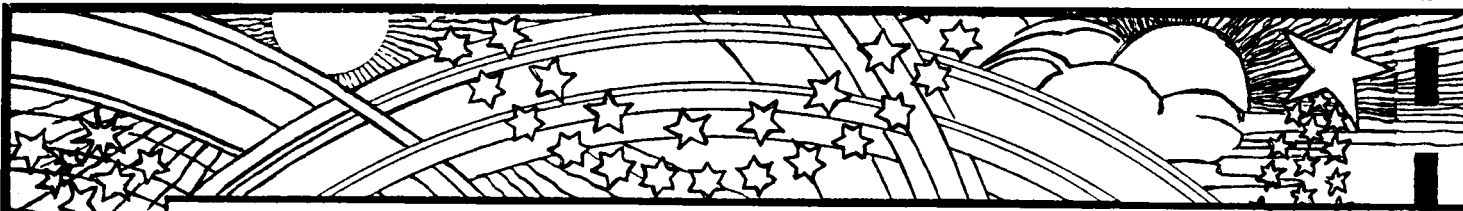
"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Activate rear view screen."

As Kirk sat watching the planet grow smaller in the distance, he knew that the name, Arridis I, would forever remind him of sagebrush and bitter memories. He turned to glance at Spock and found the Vulcan watching him. On his face Kirk could read the quiet contentment that Spock could not conceal. He remembered the terror they had felt and the closeness they had shared, moments when Spock's gentle care had been the only beacon in the vast sea of misery. The ordeal in the desert had formed a closer bond between them.

Kirk turned back to see the planet disappear in the velvet darkness of space.

They were not *all* bitter memories after all.



The Key

... Memory is the bridge between the past and the present, the treasured key that unlocks the door to a time that is no more...

I remember chess games and sitting up late in my quarters, relaxing after a day of stress and demands,

And how Bones and I would always share a brandy - and you wouldn't. I remember walking onto the bridge and having you rise from the command chair, as though you'd been keeping it secure for me,



And glancing over to the science station and seeing you there.

*I remember shore leaves
planetfalls*

maintaining orbit

and one frantic trip to Vulcan

And a serviceable, efficient military barracks that somehow managed to reflect the vibrant passion of your homeworld.



I remember sending you off in the shuttlecraft - because you were always
the most qualified to go - and wondering if you'd make it back

And having you return safely and being aware that I could breathe again
I remember all the times you saved my ship
my career
my sanity...
my life

And I remember the gestures and looks that said so much more than words,
The square set of your shoulders, hands clasped behind your back in a
manner that kept your emotional control intact; a stance which I, too,
often maintained. Did I emulate you or was it the other way around?
Your fingers steepled when you were deep in thought
The uplifting of your eyebrow that so often was the closest you ever
came to a smile
And an occasional genuine smile... only for me...

I remember the bantering between you and McCoy that was never as serious
as it sounded

And how you tolerated my kinds of madness
humor
obsessions

I remember discovering your ability to mindmeld with VanGelder, and Nomad,
and the Mother Horta

And later, feeling those first gentle touches with my mind -
to save me from the fantasy bullets
to bring me back from Kirok
and another time I can't quite recall

I remember an insatiable curiosity, a frustrating stubbornness, an
exasperating imperturbability, a dogmatic logic... a fierce loyalty...
a kind of invincibility... and... an... endearing vulnerability.

I remember unshed tears and quiet laughter
unspoken fears and stable confidence
the hope, the dreams and the time of wonder
the anticipation when our future was bright and new and a whole
galaxy awaited

But most of all I remember
the beloved presence in my heart, in my mind, by my side
that is no longer there.

BEVERLY VOLKER



❧ *Fidus Achates* ❧

Is it destiny?
 (Alien concept; incomprehensible...)
 Or chance - blind chance?
 (No, too random.)
 Magnetism?
 (On your side, certainly!)
 Or cosmic attraction?
 (Scientifically sound - universal basic;
 and what are we, but microcosms?)
 Is the law that holds us together
 the same one that holds together
 atoms, suns, galaxies?

Casting you away
 is as impossible as
 circumventing that law of nature.
 I know; I've tried.

Is there a penalty to pay
 for trying to tear asunder
 the foundation of cosmos,
 the fabric of space,
 the core of existence?
 Does the universe collapse on one,
 or do the suns recede
 taking away their planets.
 their light, their beauty, their life?
 and leave one alone -
 in the dark - cold...
 and chilled to the bone
 on a desert planet.

Golden eyes
 warred with the sun of my home
 and won.
 Will I ever find an explanation
 for this phenomenon?
 All I know is
 now warmth embraces me.
 It is enough.
 You are my reality.
 Undeniable.

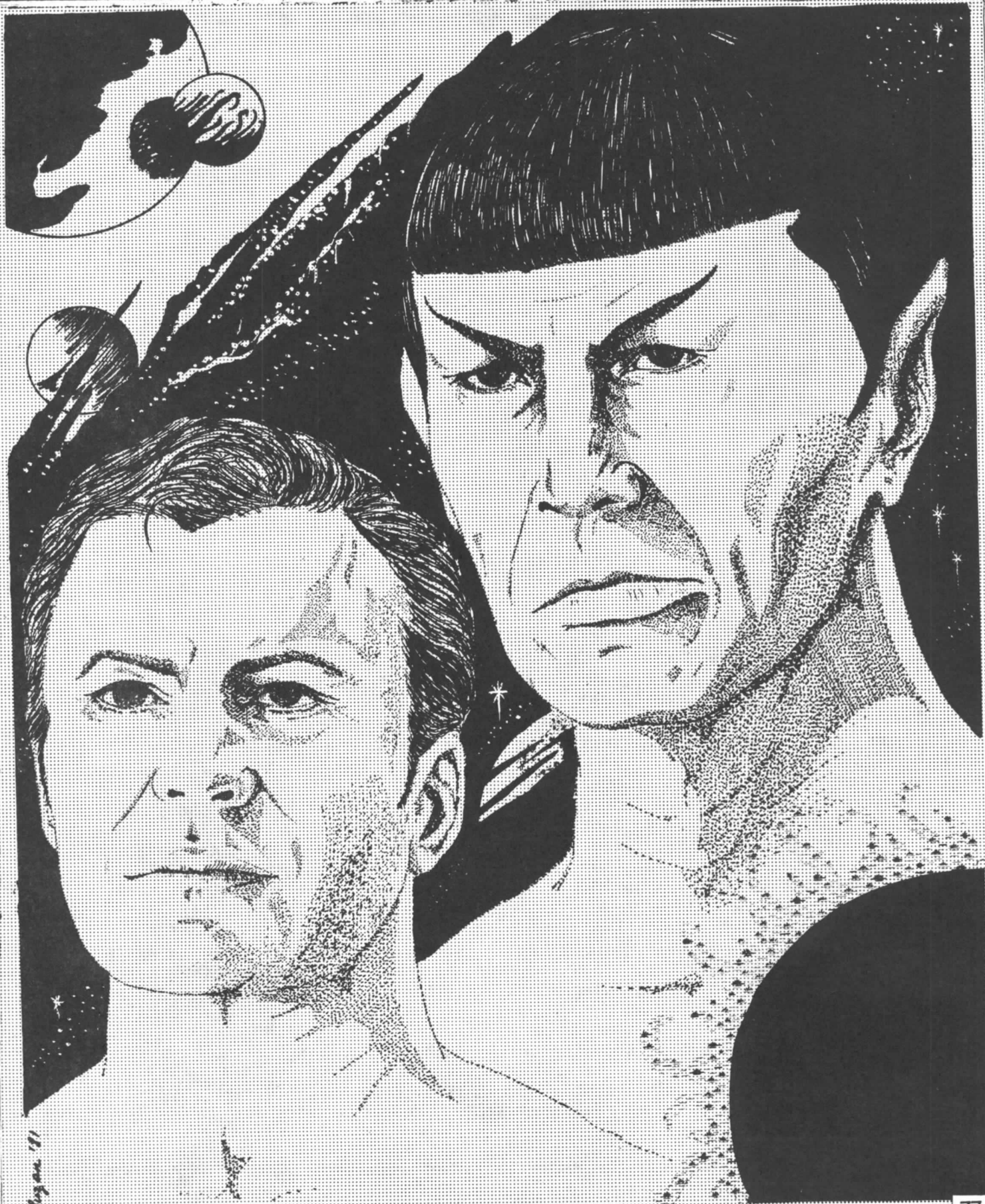
*I can see it
 in your deep, dark eyes.
 (Fathomless to most,
 enigmatic to some,
 beloved to me.)
 The questions -
 endless...
 Doubts -
 still!
 YOU are wasting OUR time!
 I don't have as much of it,
 you know.*

*Where is the
 logic
 in seeking reasons
 for the inevitable?*

*Why deny
 what exists?
 Your denial
 hurts me,
 but it's pack and parcel of you;
 I accept it.
 Accept me.
 Us.
 Inescapable!
 Do I have questions?
 Of course.
 Do I need answers?
 Not necessarily.*

*Your presence is enough.
 Recriminations?
 No, past is past,
 you are here.
 Punishment - are you kidding?
 I wish I could stop you
 from punishing yourself.
 I exist,
 so do you (thank God) -
 we ARE.*

SUZAN LOVETT



Suzanne '81

SANDCASTLES



Merle Decker

"But Spock, how do you know you won't like it?" Kirk asked in his most engaging manner. The sea breeze caught at his hair, ruffling the light brown strands gently, while the everchanging light reflected off the restless waves mirrored in his eyes, turning them green. The surf's continual roar thrummed in the air like a deep bass note. They were alone on a long stretch of white beach, with only a few sea birds wheeling and calling overhead.

Spock crossed his arms and assumed his most formal tone. "Captain, we are on a planetary survey and have no time for such frivolous activities."

"Now you know this planet has already been surveyed, Spock," Kirk retorted. "The other scientists are quite able to run the atmospheric tests they were sent here to do. That's why I got us away from the rest of the landing party. There are no dangerous life forms to worry about, no one near to disturb us, so there's no reason why we can't..." His voice faded off as he saw the implacable look carved into the Vulcan's face. "Well, *I'm* going to," he concluded firmly. He turned and marched down to the shore's edge.

Pacing along the border between land and sea, Kirk studied the smooth, wave-polished sand as if looking for something. Suddenly he froze, a smile washing across his face like sunlight. Kneeling on the damp sand, he tossed the knapsack he had slung over one shoulder to the ground and began digging energetically. He was just molding the first hastily assembled pile into a rough cylindrical shape when he sensed Spock standing quietly behind him.

"I thought you were going to make a study of those tide pools we passed," Kirk asked nonchalantly without turning his head. He patted another heap of wet sand on top of his growing mound, smoothing it down and then shaping it with great care.

"That structure is architecturally unsound, Captain."

"This *structure* is a castle... and it's sound enough," Kirk said, punctuating his statement with firm pats to the sides of the tower of sand.

"I suggest, however... "

"Who's building this, you or me?"

Silence. Spock moved around the budding sandcastle, studying it dubiously.

"Shit!" Kirk glared at Spock over the collapsed pile of sand. "If you say, 'I told you so', I'll..." He trailed off ominously, leaving the implied threat hovering in the air between them.

Spock's eyebrows disappeared into his bangs. He turned without a word and headed down the beach.

Damn, Kirk thought, *I shouldn't have yelled at him. Now he's leaving...* His thought trailed away in puzzlement as he saw the Vulcan stoop down and retrieve something from a pile of seaweed. Kirk sat back on his heels, waiting, while Spock headed back to him.

"I believe this would help, Captain," Spock remarked calmly, holding out a short, thick piece of driftwood for Kirk's inspection. He dropped to his knees next to his Captain, thrusting the wood into the middle of the collapsed heap of sand. "If we mold the sand around this, it should provide enough structural support for our purpose," and with that, Spock began to demonstrate.

Kirk nodded solemnly, although it took quite a bit of effort not to break into a full-fledged grin. "I believe you're right, Mr. Spock," he agreed seriously, and then joined the Vulcan in his task.



The sun had reached its zenith when they finally called a break. They moved back from their work and sat, side by side, quietly studying the emerging shapes. A large medieval castle lay before them, a deep moat filled with seawater surrounding it. A pyramid, joined to the castle by interconnecting canals, lay nearby.

Kirk grabbed the knapsack he had discarded earlier and pulled out two sandwiches and a thermos. He handed the peanut butter and jelly to Spock and kept the chicken salad for himself. "Not bad," he commented happily as his eyes studied the crenelated battlements. "But wouldn't a couple of onion domes look good on a building right there?" He pointed to a nearby stretch of virgin sand.

"Jim, so far, *all* these buildings are Terran. I believe a Vulcan *rizah* should be next," Spock commented coolly. "Its heavily fortified walls would blend well with the castle's architecture."

"Okay, the rizah next, then the onion domes. Also I was thinking that if we built up a whole dock area fronting on the ocean..." Kirk's face lit with animation as his imagination ran free. Taking a last hurried bite of

his sandwich, he brushed off some of the caked sand adhering to his sodden pant legs and dragged the willing Vulcan back to his labors.



"When I was little," Kirk reminisced quietly as he laid in a canal, "I remember vividly the one time I went to the beach. My dad was still alive then, and the four of us went to Florida one summer. It was too hot, but I remember those long stretches of beach. I started building a sandcastle and asked Sam if he wanted to help. He said it was kid's stuff. I remember that really hurt. Then when I finally got back to the ocean years later, I was afraid people would think I was childish if I built one. But I still wanted to." He shook his head ruefully. "It's sad how much other people's opinion shapes your words and actions."

Spock had sat back and was watching Kirk intently. "But you are doing what you wish now."

"I've grown up. I don't give a damn what most people think of me."

"But not all." The Vulcan's words were quietly spoken.

"No, not all. Some people's opinion matters very much." Kirk regarded Spock levelly. "Very much indeed."

Spock began to reach out, then halted his wayward hand, "Your nose is starting to peel," he noted clinically.

Kirk blinked at the non sequitur, then smiled, breaking the serious mood. "Come on, let's get back to work!"



The sun was just touching the sea-rimmed horizon when Kirk sat back with a tired sigh and studied their completed citadel. Spock was just putting the last finishing touches to the outer walls. The Vulcan's hands moved with sensuous grace over the wall's surface, smoothing down the final imperfections. A warm, gentle smile spread over Kirk's face. His serious, unemotional, non-frivolous First Officer had blown his image... For Kirk, he had let himself relax - if anyone else had been present this would never have happened. Trust.

At that moment Spock raised his head and their eyes locked glances. Rising to his feet, he moved to Kirk's side and sat again, arm and leg brushing his companion's. Kirk was moved by a sudden impulse and before he could reconsider he had reached out to clasp Spock's hand. He held his breath, dreading rejection. Slowly the long, supple fingers tightened around his - and Kirk found he could breathe again. They sat there, silently watching the swollen red disc of the sun slip beneath the ocean's rim.

When the first stars of evening sprang into life overhead and the last muted colors of sunset lay banded in the western sky, they rose to their feet. There was a wistful expression in Kirk's expressive eyes as he carefully studied their city of sand.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Kirk observed, a single note of sadness echoing in his voice.

Spock nodded, understanding as usual the drift of Kirk's thoughts. "All material things perish, Jim. Some are just more transitory than others."

"I know," Kirk admitted, continuing to look at their city, "but it's still a shame."

A sudden glimmer of light sprang to life in the Vulcan's dark eyes. He turned to the discarded knapsack lying just behind them and retrieved his tricorder. Aiming the device at their hardiwork, Spock slowly turned it until all the sand-shapes had been scanned and recorded in the machine's intricate depths.

The puzzled expression on Kirk's face was soon replaced by one of complete understanding. He reached out, placing a hand lightly on one blue-clad shoulder. "Thank you," he replied simply, an intimate smile of sharing touching his lips.

Spock hesitantly returned the smile, the strict controls of Vulcan loosening and falling away under the onslaught of such unguarded warmth. "It would have been, as you said, a shame not to have some remembrance of this," he answered not too steadily.

Kirk nodded briefly in agreement. "Of this and other things," he said quietly.

Slowly the last remnants of light faded from the sky and night regained full command of the world. The stars were brilliant points of light overhead, drawing Kirk's gaze upward. He let out a long, regretful sigh. "I guess it's time we got back to the ship."

They quickly gathered their things together and stood ready for beamup. "Enterprise, two to beam aboard," Kirk requested into his communicator. Then he turned to Spock, a sudden devilish gleam in his eye.

"Spock..." Kirk started. The Vulcan raised a questioning eyebrow. "Next time we're due to go on shore leave, I have a great idea... Have you, by any stray chance, ever had a *snowball fight*?" He grinned wickedly.

Spock's bemused expression and his reply were swallowed up in the transporter effect.

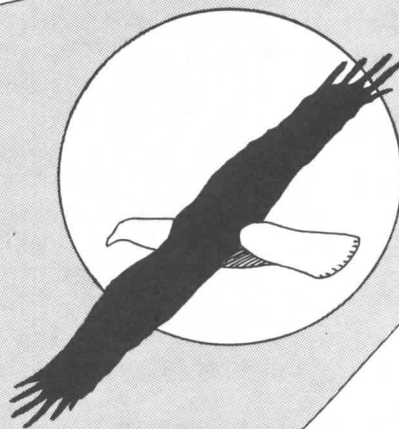
Like A Golden Eagle

*Like a golden eagle,
proud and strong,
Lifting skyward to the stars and sun.
This is where you belong
To seek your destinies, heedless of the danger.*

*I cannot halt your flight,
clip your wings and destroy the spirit,
Nor bind you with the silken cord
of Love's demands,
Nor cage you in the circle of my own fear.*

*For only by letting you go
will you be free to return to me.
Yet, each time my heart
shall cease to beat
Until I see you safely home.*

Beverly Volker



THE COST

Susie Gordon

"How much further, Spock?" James Kirk was leaning heavily on his First Officer.

"Less than a mile now, Jim," Spock replied softly.

"It's no good." Kirk brought them both to a complete halt. "I can't go on. I've got to rest."

"A little further. Over there. The rocks and small shrubs will give us cover," Spock urged his injured Captain. Half-dragging Kirk into the close cluster of boulders and scrub brush that formed a natural source of cover and protection, Spock eased Kirk down to rest his back against one of the largest boulders. From this vantage point, they would be able to see the path they had been following without being visible themselves.

Spock realized what it must have cost his friend to admit his exhaustion. Kirk was always the strong leader who thought nothing of pushing his own strength and courage to the limit and beyond. Now, to have to admit weakness, to have to give in to his injuries, Kirk would feel he had been betrayed by his own body.

Resting his head back against the rock, the Captain closed his eyes as he tried to control the tremors that shook him. He had driven his own strength and endurance to the very edge and his body could no longer respond.

Spock shifted the heavy knapsack from one shoulder to the other. The dilithium crystals were crude in shape and configuration and they had taken enough to re-energize the ship's power on board the Enterprise. The Vulcan knelt beside his friend, his own tired eyes filled with love and respect for the one man that shared his life and heart.

"Jim, we do not have time for you to rest," Spock hated to state the obvious. "The ship's orbit is rapidly deteriorating. Mr. Scott must have these crystals."

The effort of merely moving his head was costly to Kirk and Spock knew his friend would never be able to continue. The weary hazel eyes looked at Spock, and Kirk attempted a small smile. "This is where we part company." His voice was low.

The Vulcan opened his mouth to protest, but Kirk continued. "Listen to me. My ship, my crew will perish if Scotty doesn't get those crystals, and the shuttlecraft is still a mile away. Alone, you could cover the distance in no time. Leave me here, Spock."

"No, Jim, I cannot." Spock's voice was firm. His eyes darkened as his mind raced through the rationale of his friend's words. "I cannot leave you."

"Then we'll have nothing to return to. The Enterprise will be destroyed; the crew, over four hundred lives gone. Spock, please, you're wasting valuable time. Go on. Leave me your phaser. If someone is following us, I can delay them from these rocks. Hurry. You can come back for me once the crystals are on their way to Scotty."

As Kirk was explaining, Spock checked the ugly wound under the makeshift bandage across Kirk's chest. Kirk had been shot by a small hand-held weapon which had fired a jelly-like substance that immediately adhered to anything it touched. The substance had landed on Kirk's chest, instantly burning away his shirts and sticking to his bare skin. The searing pain had been incredible, and reflex had caused him to grab and pull at the substance, burning his hands as well. Spock had quickly removed his own outer shirt and using its thicknesses of material, removed as much of the jelly as he could, receiving minor burns himself in the process.



The Enterprise had just entered an uncharted sector of the quadrant to investigate a large planet, when they had encountered a highly developed energy-dampening field. Appearing on the ship's sensors as a fixed beam, the computer had projected back along its path to a point many thousand parsecs away. In minutes, the beam had drained the energy from the dilithium on board ship, despite all efforts to prevent it. Life support was immediately put on battery reserves. Before the Enterprise had crossed the path of the beam, Spock had been investigating the large planet they were now orbiting. Class M in all respects, the planet had vast deposits of ore, precious metals and dilithium. Sensor sweeps also revealed the presence of various life forms on the planet.

Transporters were inoperative without power and the decision to use the shuttlecraft was made quickly. Soon the Captain, First Officer, and Ensign Chekov were on their way to the planet's surface. The engines on board the small craft had been supplimented by battery power, but once the shuttlecraft was away from the influence of the lethal beam, its engines had returned to full power. The small ship's sensors then picked up the life form readings on the planet they were approaching.

Once they had landed, Chekov had been ordered to remain with the craft in case of trouble. Before leaving the Enterprise, Spock's sensors had also revealed evidence of violent and unpredictable storms on the planet. Uprooted trees, evidence of heavy water runoffs, bore witness to the strong force of the turbulence. If the shuttlecraft should be damaged during one of the storms, they would be stranded on the planet.

Following the readings on Spock's tricorder, the two men had walked toward the dilithium readings, aware that they were also heading in the direction of a humanoid settlement. It was probable that some kind of mining operation was going on, and Kirk hoped to be able to bargain for the crystals.

Without warning, Kirk and Spock had found themselves surrounded by a group of Tellerites. Outnumbered, they had been disarmed, taken prisoner, and roughly escorted to the mining area. Crude, makeshift tents had been constructed near the mine entrance, and Kirk and Spock were shoved inside the largest tent.

A tall, slender man got to his feet and approached them. "What have we here?" He was not a Tellerite, but clearly their leader.

"I have a ship in orbit and in desperate need of dilithium," Kirk explained. "I'm Captain James Kirk of the starship Enterprise, and this is my First Officer, Mister Spock." He saw the man stiffen. "I would be willing to pay..." As Kirk spoke, he reached around behind his back to point at a pile of knapsacks on the floor that were spilling their dilithium contents. Apparently thinking that Kirk was making a threatening move, the tall, slender man fired the weapon in his hand and the substance landed on Kirk's chest. Kirk fell to the floor, Spock at his side instantly trying to help as the tall man turned to two of the Tellerites.

"Keep them here," he spoke sharply.

"Yes, Narso."

Blackened bits of burned skin and flesh scored the outer edges of the open wound on Kirk's chest. Spock worked carefully, as tenderly as he could, knowing Kirk was in great pain. Kirk's hands were also burned and quite painful. When Spock finished his task, using remnants of Kirk's gold shirt as bandages, he glanced down at Kirk.

"What have we stumbled into, Spock?" Kirk asked, his voice strained by his discomfort.

"This mining operation appears to be quite makeshift and temporary. Obviously this is their claim, and perhaps they thought us to be... what was the term? Claim jumpers?"

"These Tellerites are most likely mining without the knowledge of their government. Did you notice how Narso reacted when I told him who we were?" Kirk reminded.

"A normal reaction if he thought the Federation were getting involved. He is no doubt mining for personal gain and employing the Tellerites for minimal wages."

Kirk grimaced. "Well, we can't worry about an outlaw operation at this time. The important thing is to get the dilithium back to the ship before it's too late. There are more than enough crystals here for the ship, but how do we get them out of here and back to the shuttlecraft?"

Spock moved his head slightly in the direction of the two guards. Kirk nodded and moaned rather loudly, attracting the attention of the two Tellerites. Moving closer to the Captain, they were caught off-guard by the Vulcan. Spock pushed one of the guards away while he applied the neck pinch to the second. The man slipped to the floor and Spock noticed one of their phasers stuck in the man's waistband. Bending to retrieve the weapon, he failed to see the first guard taking aim at his back. Instantly, however, Kirk saw the man's weapon raise into firing position and, moving quickly, Kirk shoved his friend from the line of fire.

"Spock! Watch out!" He shouted as he moved. He had successfully pushed away Spock when he heard the weapon fire and felt the burning sensation again as the substance passed by his hip and thigh, his skin receiving only a glancing blow this time.

Spock jumped toward the guard and disabled him with the neck pinch. "Jim!" Kneeling beside Kirk, he could smell scorched flesh. In agony, Kirk tried to keep a firm grip on his reactions, but his face gave him away. Spock knew the torment Kirk was enduring and yet trying to hide.

"Didn't count on getting hit myself..." Kirk's voice broke.

"You took the blast meant for me, Jim."

"Forget it. Just get us out of here." Kirk spoke as Spock helped him to his feet. Glancing down into the many knapsacks that held the recently mined dilithium, Spock slung one of the sacks over his shoulder, and helped his friend out of the tent to begin their long journey to the shuttlecraft.



Spock's feelings were in turmoil. His need to stay with Kirk and help him had to be weighed against the necessity of leaving him, and he despised the choice he had to make.

"I... resist leaving you, Jim. But I, too, see no other alternative. You will be well hidden here if we are indeed being followed. I shall turn these crystals over to Mr. Chekov, get another communicator, and return shortly."

"Go on, Spock, before it's too late." Kirk took the phaser from his friend. Spock got to his feet, adjusted the knapsack on his shoulder and looked down at Kirk. The two shared glances and unspoken vows and promises passed between them. Finally the look was broken and Spock started away from the hiding place.

"Take care, Spock," Kirk whispered as he watched the Vulcan leave. Part of him was hoping Spock would turn around and part was hoping he wouldn't. He could not trust himself not to call him back and he could not delay Spock if he were to save his ship. Spock could cover the remaining distance in no time and be back before he knew it. The thought began to comfort him since he could no longer see Spock. Kirk rested his head against the rock. His chest was continuing its unending burning as was his hip and thigh. The caustic effects of the jelly substance to his skin was unbearable. His hands, now wrapped in dirty rags, were trying to hold the phaser but felt clumsy and awkward. His mind tried to shut out the agony by thinking through the desired chain of events: Spock would reach the shuttlecraft shortly; send Chekov and his precious cargo back to the ship. Then Spock would return and together they would wait until the transporter was operational again. *Hurry, Spock, I want you here with me. I need you here...*

The sounds of someone approaching made him realize his attention had wandered. He was suddenly aware how precarious his position had become. The rocks and shrubs would offer some protection but he was not sure for how long. Tightening his grip on the phaser, he knew he had to give Spock the time needed to complete his task. Should Spock be delayed, the Enterprise would pay the ultimate price. Kirk knew he had to stop the Tellerites here by keeping their attention directed toward him.

Adjusting his position, his injured leg sent out painful objections. His vision was blurring and he wiped his arm across his eyes in an instinctive motion. It did no good; his abused body was insisting it could no longer respond to his continual demands. The sounds came closer, low voices could be heard, and Kirk pressed back against the rock, hoping to present a smaller target. He could hear stones being dislodged as the Tellerites neared. Kirk's thoughts raced as he changed his grip on the phaser to wait.

Hurry, Spock. Save my ship. I'll keep them here as long as I can. I'll distract them, try to keep them occupied. I'll try to give you time to ---

One of the Tellerites popped over the rocks and Kirk fired, hitting him with full stun force. Another head appeared but ducked down before he could get a clear shot. Hearing someone behind him, Kirk turned, his attention drawn away from the entrance. In seconds, he was overwhelmed by Tellerites; there were too many of them. Kirk's thoughts changed.

Stay away, Spock. Don't come back for me. Our journey together must end here. Then my death will mean something.

Kirk was pressed down to the hard ground by the rough handling of the enraged men. He knew he had to keep them here, keep their attention on him. The agony of his burned chest and leg increased as the men continued to hold his abused body helpless. Trying to bring his phaser up again to fire, his arm was quickly slammed against the ground. He grimaced as a booted foot pressed down on his wrist until his hand slowly opened, and the phaser slid from his grip. The punches, the grabbing and gouging continued. He could not allow himself to pass out now and submit to the blessed comfort of unconsciousness. He had to endure. It would be so easy to succumb to a dark peace, but if he did give in to such weakness now, the Tellerites would undoubtedly begin to search for Spock... a search that would certainly place Spock in danger.

Pinned to the ground by the Tellerites, Kirk was forced to stop his useless struggles, his chest heaving in the attempt to draw in more air. Narso bent over Kirk and grabbing a handful of hair, jerked his head up.

"Where is your Vulcan First Officer?" Narso demanded.

Kirk remained silent, his weary eyes threatening to close. Shaking Kirk's head, Narso was clearly angry. "I said, where is he?"

"We... split up... outside the... mining camp..." Kirk's voice was merely gasping. "I... don't know... where..." His head was released and Narso stood.

"He's lying!" Narso shouted. "Drag him out of this place. Get him out in the open, out there where the sun can get at him. Better hurry. The wind is coming up again. And pull those bandages off. The hot sun will work wonders on those burns. He'll tell us what we want to know."



Spock was out of breath when he reached the shuttlecraft. Covering the distance in record time, he had pushed his own body unmercifully. He had become aware of the breeze that had risen during his race to the shuttlecraft. Chekov had been on the lookout for the Captain and Mr. Spock and had fired up the ship's engines when he caught a glimpse of Spock approaching. As Spock got closer to the small vessel, he could see the increasing wind was interfering with Chekov's attempts to hold the craft steady.

"Mr. Chekov..." Spock was having trouble talking and gasping for breath at the same time as he climbed in the ship. "You must... get these... crystals... back to the Enterprise... without delay."

"Sir, where's the Captain?" Chekov asked.

"No time... to explain now, Ensign, however, the Captain... has been... injured. Give me your communicator. Tell Mr. Scott... as soon as the ship is out of danger to give priority to the transporter. He is to lock in on this communicator and beam up the Captain and myself as soon as possible. I am returning to him now. Remember, Ensign, time is of prime importance."

Chekov held the controls firmly, trying to compensate for the unpredictable wind gusts. "Don't worry, Mr. Spock. I'll get them there safe and sound. But I must hurry, sir, or this wind might make taking off impossible." He was well aware of the great responsibility that had just been entrusted to him.

Spock removed a phaser from the weapons locker and as he left the shuttlecraft, Chekov called out, "Good luck, sir!"

Spock began retracing his path back to Kirk as he heard the ship take off. He had not mentioned to the young crewman he had heard Kirk's phaser just as he left the Captain's hiding place. One short burst, just the one, and then... silence. Racing back, he was concerned about his friend.

As he closed the distance, the silence held an ominous meaning for him. He could not believe... would not believe Kirk was dead. He was certain Kirk would not be killed that quietly. Silently, he approached the rocky area, dreading what he might find... or in this case, might not find.

Kirk was no longer there. Glancing around, he saw signs of a struggle and marks of someone being dragged away. Following the trail, Spock found the dead Tellerite. Kirk's aim had been true. Hearing voices off to his right, Spock moved quickly in their direction. A small group of the Tellerites were gathered around Kirk, tied spread-eagled to the ground, his bandages removed, the open burns fully exposed to the rays of the sun and the ravages of the wind. Bathed in sweat, Kirk's breathing was labored.

"I'm growing weary of asking the same questions over and over, Kirk," Narso was pacing back and forth, glaring down at the helpless man as he spoke. "Once again, where is your First Officer?"

Though storm clouds were beginning to gather, the glare, the heat of the sun was unbearable. Kirk felt as though his body was being consumed by waves of extreme heat. He had to conquer the torment, the fires from Hell itself to protect his friend and his mission. Turning his head from side to side in reply, Kirk would not trust his own voice to answer. To open his mouth now might allow the trapped screams to escape. Should Spock still be on this planet, should he be close enough to hear the screams, he might just plunge his own life in jeopardy to save him. This Kirk could not or would not do... no matter what the cost.

Spock tensed, his face twisted with rage at the hideous treatment of his Captain. The sun's heat on Kirk's open burns was creating such a reaction in Spock that he could hardly keep his thoughts from overwhelming his reason. Though he would have the advantage of surprise if he attacked, the numbers were all wrong. He knew he would be of no use to Kirk if he were taken prisoner himself. But he also knew he had to do something soon or Kirk would be dead.

Heavy storm clouds continued to gather and the wind increased in power. The Tellerites and their leader stared wide-eyed at the darkening sky - the sun now all but gone.

"We've got to get back to camp or we'll lose everything," Narso shouted. "You know what happened the last time. It took us almost two days to clean up the mess."

"What about him?" The Tellerite had to yell to be heard over the now nearly gale-force winds, as he pointed to Kirk.

"Leave him! He'll be here when we get back. We've got to go!" Narso turned and led the others back toward the group of tents near the mine.

The force of the wind continued as Spock rapidly made his way to Kirk's side. His eyes came to rest on Kirk's face, now deeply lined with pain and exhaustion; his head turned slightly to one side, his mouth slightly open in a slack-jawed expression. Spock knew his friend had passed out. Kirk's face was crimson with the effects of the sun, his body lying limp, his breathing labored.



HAWKS 82

Kneeling, the Vulcan began to untie his friend's wrist; a task made difficult by the tightness of the rope and his desire to keep Kirk from further pain. At last, the rope came free and Spock reached down to untie Kirk's ankle. Glancing up the length of the tortured body, Spock's heart felt like lead. He knew that circumstances had forced him to leave Kirk. But he did not mean for him to suffer all this. He had been too long returning though he had raced as fast as he possibly could. He still was not fast enough to prevent this. He wondered now, had leaving Kirk been worth the sight lying before him. Spock untied Kirk's other ankle and moved to begin on the rope holding his other wrist.

If he had stayed, what would he have accomplished? The ship would be destroyed; the crew - over four hundred men and women dead. Kirk's world and his would be gone forever. If they had survived, how would Kirk have reacted knowing Spock had refused to leave him?

What he had done, had to be done. But now, looking down at his Captain, the cost of his leaving had been too high.

Kirk's exposed skin was extremely red, with splotches of grey forming here and there. The open burns were dried and caked with sweat, blood, and expelled body fluids. Touching Kirk's arm, Spock noticed his skin was dry despite the beads of sweat on his face. Spock was kneeling, his hands frantic in their desire to free Kirk.

The wind was almost constant now, the dark clouds heavy with moisture. He finally got the last rope untied as the first drops of rain began to fall. The cold rain landed on Kirk's body and the water contacting the burns brought new depths of pain. Kirk's eyes opened wide in reaction as his body arched. Spock took him by the shoulders and lifted him onto his own thighs, holding him close to his body.

"Let it out, Jim. The others are gone. Release it. Let it go," Spock gently urged as he tried to protect his friend from the pouring rain using his own body.

Kirk turned his face into Spock's shirt and let the pain, the torment, the helplessness escape in a long, exhausting scream. Muffled by Spock's shirt, the sobs continued and the Vulcan held his friend tightly until the ordeal ran its course. Spock knew the trust, the honesty of what Kirk felt toward him had been sealed by the desperate display he had just witnessed. After long moments, the sobs stopped and Kirk's body went limp in his arms. The rain continued its relentless downpour, the wind still blew with a vengeance. Spock could feel a shiver wrack his companion's body.

Leaning Kirk's head back slightly, Spock looked into his face. The rain was plastering his hair down, beads of water gathering in the corners of his eyes, until they ran off his long lashes. Taking his free hand, Spock pushed the hair back from Kirk's forehead. "I should never have left you, Jim," he confessed.

"Sp... ock," the word was almost a cry.

"The Enterprise is safe, but the cost, Jim. The cost to you," Spock hesitated, then continued. "Mr. Scott should be making contact soon." He pulled Kirk closer to his chest.

"Hold me... close. Hold me... tight, Spock. I'm... so... cold." Slight tremors shook his body as Spock tightened his grip.

The communicator sounded and Spock reached around to retrieve the device. "Spock here."

"Ready to beam up, Mr. Spock. We have medical equipment standing by. Mr. Chekov told us the Captain had been injured."

"Beam us up immediately, Mr. Scott."

Scott operated the transporter controls and he and Doctor McCoy were both surprised and relieved when two figures appeared on the transporter grids - relieved that they had found and returned the two stranded men, and surprised to see Spock kneeling, cradling Kirk in his arms, both men dripping wet. McCoy and Scott hurried to them and could hear Spock softly assuring the Captain. "You're home, Jim, back aboard the Enterprise."

McCoy and Scott watched as Spock lifted Kirk up into his arms as he got to his feet, a sudden gasp of pain the only sound in the room. Carrying Kirk to the waiting gurney, Spock gently laid him down, Scott helping to hold the table steady, McCoy pulling the lightweight cover over Kirk's body.

"Come on, Spock, you, too. Down to Sickbay. I want to look you over," McCoy insisted. McCoy knew the request to accompany them to Sickbay was not necessary; nothing would remove Spock from Kirk's side now until he was out of danger.

"Sp... ock?" Kirk tried to raise slightly but was too tired.

Spock rested his hand on Kirk's shoulder and squeezed gently. "I'm here, Jim."

The tired, weary Captain looked up at the Vulcan, a smile crossing his drawn and haggard face. He could not explain the sensation as he felt the closeness, the security of his ship wrap around him, envelope him once again. He... no, *they* were home.

"Spock... the cost was justified."



*Differences had combined into unity - they were irrevocably joined,
two halves of a whole - together and complete, or separate and alone.*
SUSAN DORSEY: CONTACT 3



Requiem

SOMETIMES
AS I'M FIGHTING TO THE SURFACE
IN A SEA OF PAIN, MY EYES'
FIRST FOCUS IS ON YOUR FACE
AND I SEE MY AGONY
MIRRORED THERE
FOR JUST A FLEETING MOMENT.

IT MAKES ME GRIEVE FOR THE PRICE
MY BEDSIDE VIGIL COSTS YOU.
YET TIME AFTER TIME, YOU'RE THERE -
THE REPETITION NOT DIMMING
YOUR ATTENDANCE ONE IOTA.

I'LL NEVER ASK OF YOU
WHAT YOU CANNOT GIVE,
THO' GOD KNOWS THE SOURCE OF
STRENGTH YOU ARE TO ME.

IF THERE'S EVER A TIME
WHEN THAT VIGIL'S PRICE BECOMES
TOO HIGH...
SAVE YOURSELF...
I'LL UNDERSTAND.

LUCY CRIBB

CHRIS GRAHL



CAPTAIN'S COURAGE

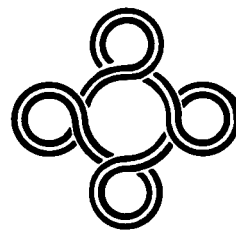


*I often used to think how,
Inexplicably,
Our lives have always been a
Mixture of reality and illusion.
We do what other men
Can barely dream,
We achieve the impossible
And make it routine...
Almost.
Yet, I have bad dreams, too,
Sometimes,
Recurring nightmare images
That refuse to fade in the
Morning light.
I don't ask what they mean,
Why or how I dream them,
I live for the present and
Trust the stars for tomorrow.
Yet the dark images remain.
How many times have I lost you?
How many times did you fall?
And how many times
In a fantasy hell
Did I buy your reprieve
With a piece of my soul?
I can't control these fantasies,
They fade and
Reality beckons,
I'm drawn unwillingly along,
Out of control in a universe that
No longer makes sense.
My soul, my pride,
My love,
Are not enough it seems --
I cry out against the stars... !*

*Shaken, I draw a ragged breath and look up
Toward the lights in the sky that
Haunt me now.
The stars always promised me
That tomorrow exists.
I must believe...
Your soul is my soul,
We are bound together
Inexplicably,
Like reality and fantasy,
Illusion and logic,
Fiction and truth.
The past and the future are one
And we are a never ending
Now.*

MARTHA J. BONDS

EMPTY LIVES



Nancy J. Kippax

A stray wisp of k'telza skittered aimlessly across the ground, hesitating only momentarily as it met the dusty black boot of the man who stood in its path. The tall, grim-faced Vulcan regarded the tiny intrusion without a flicker of interest. *K'telza* - Terrans would call it a tumbleweed - was common on the Vulcan plains which ringed the desert. On a face covered with grime from his travels, a brief expression of pain began to form - the eyes narrowed, the lips tightened - and he made no effort to suppress it. Here, alone, there was no need.

He grimaced because for an instant, noting the k'telza, he had automatically supplied the Terran equivalent name, and he regretted that his thoughts were so far removed from the language of his fathers. Yet that rationale, logical though it might seem, could not justify the urge he felt to cry, to roar, to smash something, to collapse on the dry hard dirt and beat his fists into something. The emotions held sternly at bay repulsed him, unthinkable actions that would serve no purpose. He was beginning to believe he had lost all ability to control, all semblance of Vulcan discipline.

He was home, yet he had no idea what he was doing here, why he had come, or where he would go now. He had known only that he needed to get away, needed time and distance, and the call of Vulcan was strong, luring him back with gentle, peaceful whispers.

Another tour of duty completed, another long-range mission ended, marking for him - how many? Four, on the Enterprise alone. Twenty years of his life on a ship he had so easily learned to call his home. Yet it was not the home of his birth; it would never replace Vulcan, just as it would never replace Terra for James Kirk. They were, both of them, now back where they belonged.

His footsteps faltered. Ahead, a large boulder jutted out from a tight rock formation. Stumbling, he reached it and sank down, breathing heavily. After four days of hiking, the last two with no food and only a minimum of water, his body was exhausted, his reserves depleted, yet his mind refused to concede defeat. If he stopped moving, he would remember; positive meditation would be lost again and he would succumb to profitless emotion. Memories constantly crowded around the periphery of his mind, threatening to break through his defenses, a stray thought like a lone assassin every now and then managing to infiltrate.

'Rest, Jim, rest... we have all the time in the world... '

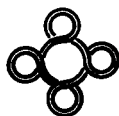
'I'm sorry if I've intruded, Captain... '

'This Admiralty - it is important to you?... '

'Jim, I cannot... '

Words. Meaningless syllables of nothingness. Communication gone; what could possibly be left? He had tried to explain, tried to bridge the suddenly gaping chasm between them, and had been met with puzzlement, disassociation, even denial. And yet, how could it have been otherwise, when there was so much more that he could not say, questions to which he had no answers, emotions he could not express. Wearily, he leaned back, resting his spine against the rocks, and shut his eyes against the glare of the sun.

From the stupor of fatigue, he was powerless to conquer the musings of his mind as it searched through the ruins of his past. A moment stood out, crystal-clear among the vast gray stretches of time, a day perhaps six months ago - an eternity, an age ago, on another world far removed from this one. Alpha Pyris, a small inhabited speck which had been doomed before they had ever arrived. Over ten thousand gentle, simplistic humanoids dead or dying from the natural catastrophes of earthquake, landslide, fire and flood that had ravaged their coastal habitation. Assistance had been futile, the clean-up horrifying. He remembered it very well, particularly that final day...



"Where is the Captain?" Spock had asked several of the remaining crewmen stationed around an improvised headquarters. Ensign Gover's response was typical.

"I don't know, sir. I saw him several hours ago, but he didn't say where he was going. Will we be beaming back to the ship soon?"

"Yes, Ensign. Soon... " Spock darted away, mentally finishing, 'as soon as I can find Jim and have him authorize our departure.' A slight flush of annoyance mingled with Spock's anxiety. Kirk knew they were

scheduled to leave, everything had been completed. Where had he gone? And why had he left his communicator with one of the guards, unless his disappearance was deliberate?

Abruptly, Spock stopped his frenetic search and paused, letting reason and instinct take over. He stood, lifting one hand to his temple and considered. Where *would* Kirk go? Suddenly, clearly, he knew. The one place; the obvious place. And just as clearly, he knew that he must follow.

Past broken buildings, half-crumbled houses, up what had been a road, Spock raced. The sense of urgency was motivated by his knowledge of Kirk's state of mind. While the entire crew had been shocked and upset by the situation on Alpha Pyris, no one had seemed more greatly affected than Kirk. During the past few days a thick morass of depression had settled over him, exhibited by a tight-lipped numbness through which nothing seemed to penetrate. Kirk had pitched himself into the mop-up detail, working side by side with his ensigns and lieutenants from dawn until dusk, his uniform stained with dirt and sweat.

Spock alone understood the motive for Kirk's despair. Upon their arrival, amidst the chaos of the initial organization, Kirk had confided that he had been here before, many years ago, a Starfleet advisor to assist the rapidly developing population. He had known and loved the people, the starkly beautiful seacoast, and now all was gone.

The structure toward which Spock was heading, visible now, was one of the few still relatively intact. It was a large stone house which had once been inhabited by over twenty people, in a culture which existed in such commune-style dwellings. This place - Kirk had called it Lamna Hall - was where Kirk had stayed on that earlier trip. Investigation had produced not one living being, only another group of dead bodies to be disposed of.

The Vulcan slowed his footsteps, outwardly willing his body to calm. Instinctively he knew that Kirk would need him, and he gathered his strength for the suspected emotional ordeal. It seemed, lately, as if he were constantly being called upon to deliver what he had no skills to provide.

Quietly, he stepped past the crumbled outer walls, through the courtyard whose dirt was still stained from the blood of those trapped here when the earthquake had struck. As he passed through what had been the doorway, he felt the damp chill within the heavy stone walls press in on him. Directly in front stretched the main hall, a massive community room, now a tattered shell of its former pattern.

A table and one chair had been righted and stood alone among the debris. James Kirk sat in solemn, solitary court, a bottle only barely touched in front of him.

"Captain...?" Spock approached.

The mournful eyes turned to him, unsurprised, accepting.

"How did you know where to find me?"

The question found Spock unprepared. "I... did not know for certain. When you failed to show up, I suspected you might be here."

"You're very sure of me, aren't you?" Kirk's voice was flat; Spock could not understand the tone or what he really meant.

"Jim... " He hesitated. "Captain, the men are waiting. It's time to beam up."

"You're hedging again. Don't sweep it under the rug, Spock. What if I hadn't been here? What would you have done then?"

Spock's heartbeat quickened. The chill seemed to seep into his bones. "I... I would have continued to search."

"Why?" The word was issued as a challenge.

Spock sensed the undercurrent of need, the demand for a personal answer, but he chose to feign innocence. "I don't understand, Jim. Come, we must return."

Pain flashed briefly in the hazel eyes, then Kirk turned his head away.

"I'm tired, Spock. So tired. The kind of tired that a good night's sleep won't cure." He looked back in the Vulcan's direction. "Sit down, have a drink with me. A slight delay in departure will make no difference."

Spock found another chair intact and moved it to the table. He watched as Kirk sipped from the bottle then shoved it toward him.

"Go ahead - ritualistic sharing of the fire-water. I forgot to bring down any glasses." A slight degree of animation had returned to Kirk's voice, but Spock suspected it was forced.

Reluctantly he took a sip of the smooth liqueur, relishing its warmth. His fingers remained curled around the bottle.

"Jim, I do understand your distress, truly I do. This planet held pleasant memories... "

"I used to think about returning here someday," Kirk interrupted. "I'd find myself wondering how things were going, how my friends were doing, and I'd want to pay a visit." He leaned across the table, his voice tightening. "But do you know how *many* places I've felt that way about? Do you know how many loose ends I've left flying around the galaxy?"

Spock was unable to meet the intensity in Kirk's eyes. Kirk was damning his lifestyle and consequently, damning Spock, too, as a part of that. The inference had been growing for some time, only now it had found a focus, a

reason for objection, The direction of Kirk's thoughts made Spock distinctly uncomfortable, for reasons he could not fully rationalize.

Kirk went on. "Why do we do it? We give up all the comforts, all the security. The adventure wears thin after a while. I've seen men smashed to bits, horrors, atrocities, suffering... "

"You are expressing only one aspect of the situation," Spock objected. "We have seen also beauty, wonders, things which no other eye has beheld." He stood and walked to Kirk's side. "You *are* tired, Jim. And while a period of sleep won't make you forget or solve anything, you will be better prepared to deal with it. Exhaustion clouds your perception, alters your ability to think clearly." Gently he clasped Kirk's shoulder as he spoke, trying to offer some little reassurance.

Kirk shook his head. "You *don't* understand. You think you know me, but you don't know me at all. Logic doesn't fit here."

Spock drew his hand away, stung. The rebuff sent a chill down his spine. Kirk stood abruptly and turned to face him.

"Spock... Spock, what about *you*? Are you content, are you always satisfied? You've been out here longer than I have. Don't you ever want to give it up, maybe go back to Vulcan, or visit somewhere you've been before?"

They were difficult questions, and there was an implied censure in them. The Vulcan drew a deep breath. "I've... considered it," he admitted. "But I have a duty..." He stopped, conscious of what he had almost said, not wishing to voice it, especially not to Kirk in his present mood. It must seem illogical, foolish of him to want nothing more than what he now possessed - a home, a friend, a life with which he was fully content.

"Duty - is that all there is? Is everything duty, Spock? Like now, you came here because it was your duty to find me, to get out departure underway."

Exasperated, Spock wanted to say that he thought Kirk knew him better than that, but the words stuck in his throat. As he hesitated, Kirk turned away, his voice, as he spoke again, was bitter.

"All these years... and what is there to show for them? Empty lives..."

Frustration, anxiety, boiled up anew. Frightened by the need Kirk expressed, Spock exploded. "What do you *want* from me?"

Without turning, Kirk replied softly. "If you have to ask that, there's not much point in answering. Come on. We have a ship to run."

Spock caught up to him in the courtyard, silently following his Captain's lead. He was filled with a fearsome foreboding; he was losing Jim Kirk,

losing a battle that he did not even know how to fight. In less than four months, they would be back in San Francisco, their mission completed. The future had never seemed more uncertain.

He felt he must do something, must say something to make things right again. At last he broke the tense silence.

"Jim... what you said... "

"Forget it. I didn't mean to take out my personal grief on you. I'll be all right. Really.., " He turned to Spock, a half-smile on his face, bracing up the command image, Spock knew.

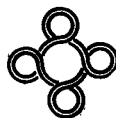
Suddenly the ground began to quiver, throwing them both off-balance. The already abused town seemed to groan in protest to this additional indignity.

"Aftershocks... " Spock paused to consult his tricorder. "Nominal rating, but I suggest we move quickly, Captain."

"Give me your communicator. I'm evacuating everyone immediately," Kirk ordered.

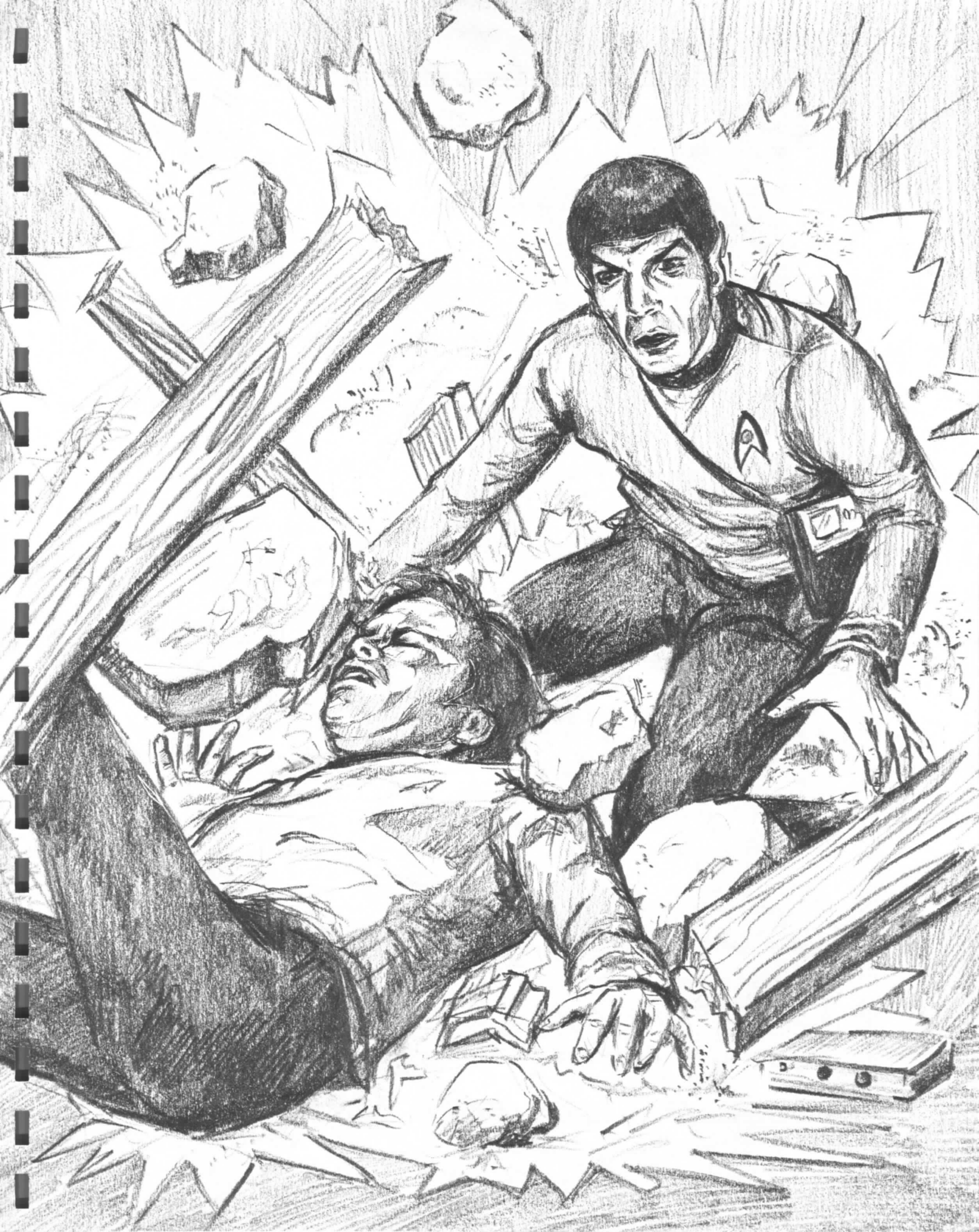
The delay was minimal, but seconds counted in such a crisis. Before Kirk had finished his transmission, a massive shockwave struck. Rock and debris rained down on them, wreaking havoc with the city. Spock tried to protect Kirk, tried to keep them both from danger, but the task was impossible against the forces of a nature gone wild.

"Jim... Jim... !" Frantic, Spock tore at the rocks and timbers entombing his Captain. As he freed the mutilated body, the world seemed to slip into a timeless black tunnel of grief and despair. His own senses swam as unconsciousness threatened to claim him. He cradled the motionless human before he, too, passed out....



An insect tickled his nose. He brushed it away, stirring, grateful to be roused from his disturbing reverie. He wanted only to forget that horrible day, his subsequent shameful breakdown in Sickbay. The injuries he had sustained had been inconsequential, but Kirk's wounds severe enough that McCoy had feared for his life, severe enough that it was nearly a month before he was able to return to duty.

Looking back, Spock could acknowledge that the incident on Alpha Pyris was not the beginning of the sour unease, but it had indeed worsened after. Kirk remained withdrawn, preoccupied, as they steadily charted a course which took them back to Earth.



Abandoned in a sense, Spock had used the time to formulate his own set of questions, to look within and to recoil from what he had found. There were no easy answers then, nor were there any to be found on this barren Vulcan plain.

He rose, only slightly refreshed by his stop, and slowly placed one foot in front of the other. It did not matter in which direction he moved; his pilgrimage had no specific goal.

Nothing in his life had any goal. That had been one of the truths he had revealed. After twenty years, he had no substantial ambitions, no clear-cut future. Kirk, at least, knew what he wanted, or what he believed he wanted. Spock had no doubt that he would accept Admiral Nogura's offer. Admiral Ciani would see to that.

It was impossible to live without purpose, without meaning. He had given his life, his total devotion to Starfleet... to Kirk... and somehow it wasn't enough - for them, or for himself.

He continued to walk steadily, grateful that he was not far from a fresh water source. He would ask permission from the Kolinahr masters, on whose property it was located, and refill his canteen, perhaps rest for a time. As he walked, he reviewed and attempted to define his immediate problem. He was, for the first time in his life, in a total mental and emotional quandary.

Long ago, long before his oath to Starfleet, he had taken another oath, pledging his life and devotion to Vulcan. He had accepted the teachings of his people. Later he had made another vow, as a scientist, to seek the true knowledge in all things, to forever question, to explore, to learn all that he could.

Somewhere in the past few years, he had drifted further and further from those self-proclaimed goals. He had allowed himself to feel human emotions, begun to think in human terms, traveled into a realm of wonders, tasting of hitherto forbidden fruits. In the final accounting, he had to decide the very question asked of him by T'Pol herself: "Are thee Vulcan, or are thee Human?"

The blackened mire of his thoughts turned bitter. If only there had been a way, a time to discuss it with Jim, if he could have been frank and spoken candidly about the doubts he was having. But Kirk had been ill and tired, with burdens of his own. There was no one else to whom he could turn, nowhere else to go. And upon arriving back at Earth, what had been difficult had become impossible. The overwhelming Terran pomposity, the unbelievable excitement, the zealous fervor of Starfleet Command over its returning Enterprise had only served to further alienate an already strained relationship. He had to force himself to accept the truth that it was over. The ship was going into drydock, the crew on extended leaves, Kirk being pressed to accept a position within the hierarchy of Command Central, Spock himself informed that he could virtually choose his next assignment,

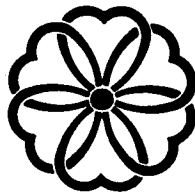
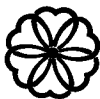
whatever his desire. No matter what happened, though, things would never again be the same.

Kirk had said it, that day on Alpha Pyris: *Empty lives*. Speeches did not count, medals did not count, not even memories could withstand the torrents of time. Ultimately, one was left alone, to face the future, to make decisions, to begin again.

It was said that the Masters at Gol were very wise. Perhaps he would request an interview and speak with them. It was permitted and within his rights, and no harm could come from an impartial opinion.

With weary steps, he neared the spring and raised one hand in time-honored salute to the guide stationed there. In robes which seemed far too heavy for this climate, the elderly man stepped toward him.

"Welcome, my son, to Gol. Refresh yourself, and be at peace.



Assimilation

*Sometimes you are quiet
and I know your thoughts.*

*Sometimes you laugh
and I know your joy.*

*Sometimes you hurt
and I feel your pain*

*Sometimes you look at me
and I am filled with love.*

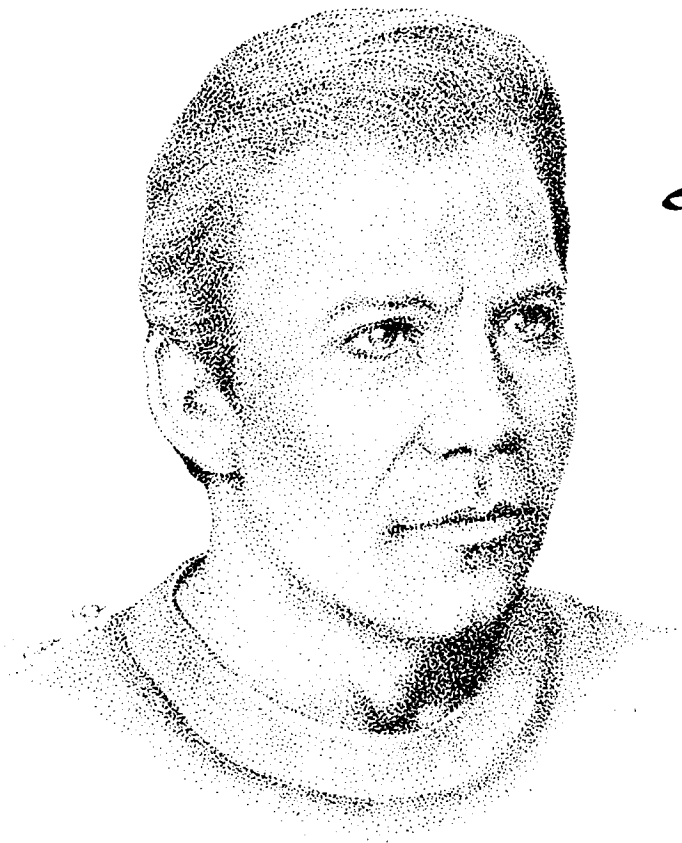
*Your happiness becomes mine
because you are part of me
and my life is yours.*

GB

Terri Sylvester

Yesterday you were there - happiness was mine.
I was dreaming wide awake.
Then you went away - emptiness was all I knew.
I could have sold my soul to have the happy times again.
Today, here you are again - bewilderment -
When can we know that contentment from long ago?
"Spock!"
"It's how we all feel..." - It's how I feel.
With you I could let me be me.
I'm ready to take a chance again - now - with you.
Looks like we'll make it - we've got to make it.

Robin D. Volker



*Looks
Like
We
Made
It*

Visions Reflected



Memories cloud my vision,
The many scattered scenes we cherished,
All those precious times that made us what we were.

Then, the cold, unfeeling lands of Vulcan called me home;
The disciplines of the Kolihnar were strict -
Purging my mind of all desires for the happiness I'd known.
And when atlast the decree was about to be proclaimed -
When I'd almost succeeded -
There you were: calling me from the stars.

Now as I stand here beside you once again,
Those memories grow stronger -
'Til all is confusion.
Who can say what the future will hold,
Yet, "this simple feeling" *will* fill all of our tomorrows,
Because we *are* what we were, then.

Robin D. Volker



What We Would Choose

Crystal Ann Taylor

Dressed only in swimming trunks and a towel slung over his shoulders, Kirk entered the main living room of the cabin and saw Spock engrossed at the portable computer. He perched on the edge of the table and gazed with open fondness at his friend until Spock's eyes raised to his.

"If Bones found you playing with that on shore leave," he admonished lightly, "he'd have your head."

"Hmmm," Spock conceded. "Fortunately, the good Doctor does not return until this evening. I should be done by then." He paused, eyeing Kirk's attire, making a quick guess of his intentions. "Furthermore," he added, his lips curving into a slight smile, "despite what you and he seem to think, Vulcans do not play. How many times must I tell you that?"

Kirk grinned, but before he could respond, Spock continued. "Besides, this shore leave was designed to give *you* the rest you need. To prevent you from overexerting yourself as you usually manage to do before you can handle the strain."

"So come swimming with me," Kirk coaxed, choosing to disregard the Vulcan's cautionary hint. "It's so good to be up and moving around after that eternity in Sickbay." He grasped the edges of the towel and stretched luxuriously against it.

"Ten days does not constitute an eternity," Spock corrected, "and after what you went through - "

"You and Bones are determined to mother hen me to death," he complained teasingly, "and don't try to deny it. One would think I was made of glass the way you two hover over me, protecting me. C'mon, I'm fine now and I can use the exercise. So put away the cataloging or whatever it is you're doing and enjoy the sunshine and water with me."

When Spock didn't respond, he leaned closer, as if to impart a conspiracy. "You can make sure I don't overdo it," he urged. "That I don't swim until I'm exhausted."

Spock recognized the bait, but refused to give in to it. "Jim, if I wish to protect my head from the demise you outlined, I should finish this before Dr. McCoy returns."

You always use that tone with me, Kirk thought warmly, when I can't talk you into something. When you just don't want to do what I suggest. "All right, my friend," he said, as he jumped down. "But one of these days, you're going to do something for the pure fun of doing it." And for the enjoyment of doing it together.

"A most illogical waste of your energy to attempt to talk me into something only you wish - "

"One day you're going to admit you like it, too," he called back, as he strode out the door. "And *that* gives me something to look forward to."

Spock tried to return his attention to the computer, but Kirk's teasing had left a warmth in the room that was distracting, an emptiness that demanded to be filled. On impulse, he walked to the window and looked out, just in time to see the firmly muscled form race across the sand and splash hedonistically into the water.

It pleased him to see Kirk so healthy and alive after being so close to death, but the reference to the future chilled him. No matter how hard he tried not to be overly protective of his Human friend and Captain, he could not allay his constant apprehensions. Not when the dangers that permeated their lives always threatened to shatter his.

Images of past times when he had almost lost Kirk cascaded in his mind. Pictures of eyes closed in unconsciousness and fists clenched tightly in denial tormented him as they coalesced into this final time, when there had almost been no future, when everything had almost ended with a broken and bloodied body, one so weak that the hazel eyes pleaded for what the voice could not.

Always it is you who has to meet the danger head-on, Spock contemplated bitterly. Always you who has to be first...to lead everything whether or not the situation concerns you directly. Always you who has to be reckless with your life. As if it meant nothing to anyone.

It was too painful to relive the last month and in self-defense, Spock forcefully tore his consciousness away, burying the memories he did not wish to revive.

Suddenly he needed to be near Jim, to banish the fears and perils in the comforting presence of his friend. He wandered down to the beach to watch the Human cut through the waves with his powerful strokes, content to share in the closeness by sitting on the rocks nearby.

Kirk waved to the Vulcan when he spotted him and started toward shore.

Spock returned the gesture, then shook his head to discourage Kirk from coming back. He wanted merely to observe his friend's activity without interrupting it and knew that Kirk would indulge his desires without self-consciousness and without the need to understand why.

With a graceful turn, Kirk headed back out to sea, reminding Spock once again how unnecessary words were between them. No matter what the distance or the circumstances, they had an affinity that bound and sustained them. But he also recalled its fragility - of how near he had come to losing that closeness....

Spock glanced at the pilot who was intent on the shuttle's controls, noting the fatigue etched in Kirk's face. The diplomatic mission they had just finished had been trying on the Captain, made more so by the fact that whenever Kirk was separated from the Enterprise, part of his mind continuously worried about her.

It had been a curious mission from the start since it was not in a sector normally patrolled by the Enterprise, but in an area that had never been fully mapped by Starfleet for reasons known only to upper echelons. Yet, Starfleet had insisted that Kirk be the one to undertake the delicate diplomatic mission; and now having successfully completed it, they were heading for rendezvous with the starship. Spock knew that they would both be grateful to see her solid lines again.

About to suggest that Kirk get some rest, the Vulcan's attention was drawn to his board. "Sensors have picked up the edge of an ion storm, Captain." He started to read off the parameters.

It didn't take Kirk long to size up the situation and his fingers danced over his controls. "Forget it, Spock," he interrupted. "It's too close already. Too dangerous. I'm giving it as wide a berth as I can. Plot a new course for me. And broadcast our position, just in case."

"Transmitting now, Captain."

The little craft responded quickly to Kirk's changes, but it was of no use. A force unleashed from the center erupted unexpectedly around the shuttle, caught it, hurled it against its own energy boundaries, then spun it in along its centripetal lines.

"Spock!" Kirk yelled as he fought with the controls, but the Vulcan was having no better luck with his.

"Useless, Captain. The pull is too great for our engines."

"No choice then but to ride it out."

They were flying blindly, out of control, gripped in forces that pulled vigorously toward the center. Impelled into the heart of the storm, they were lashed about by conflicting torques, twisted haphazardly, and

accelerated onward, their momentum multiplying with each second. Sensors were useless, giving readings that ghosted upon others until there was a collage of images. The heating of the shuttle's outer hull was the only trustworthy indication that they had indeed hit atmosphere and that crash was imminent.

Kirk fought desperately with the breaking controls while Spock tried to get him some distance-to-the-surface parameters to work with. Unfortunately, the sensors remained unreliable no matter what Spock tried.

The two men managed to slow down the shuttle just enough to prevent explosion as it impacted with the ground.

As he fought his way to consciousness, Spock felt the pressure of a restraining hand.

"Easy now. Don't move."

The words from the implanted translator were barely audible, filtering through the haze in his mind. Ignoring the bruises that were registering their presence on his nerves, Spock opened his eyes and stared groggily at the blurred image in front of him.

The face that was slowly brought into focus was unfamiliar and it confused him. He wondered where he was, then remembered, growing frantic for Kirk.

"Jim? Jim?" he whispered, trying to look around the strange humanoid.

"Do you speak our language?" the other asked hopefully, confusion and apprehension apparent in his tone.

Spock nodded. "I...." Then he quickly pressed on, too worried about Kirk to want to explain. "Later. My capt - companion, where is he?"

The humanoid caught the concern in the Vulcan's tone and his eyes flickered involuntarily to the left, then returned to face Spock. The hesitation had been enough to frighten the Vulcan into full awareness.

Spock tried once again to get up, only to be held down by strong hands.

"Our medics are doing what they can, but..." he shrugged sorrowfully, shaking his head.

Not waiting to hear more, Spock shoved against the other until the hands fell back and he was free to stagger to his feet. Almost falling in his hurry, he stumbled toward the group huddled near the rocks.

The sight of red blood splattered everywhere tightened his heart, but he elbowed his way between the others in silence. He was stunned into immobility when he saw the blood-stained cloth pressed tightly against Kirk's throat.

Unable to move, Spock studied the damage. The heel of a man's hand was pressing hard on a slippery sponge to the side of Kirk's trachea, his fingers angled back toward the ear. Kirk's skin was so pale that the closed lashes looked unnaturally dark against it, his white flesh contrasting starkly with the red-mottled tunic. The soaked cloths tossed haphazardly to the side told Spock that Kirk had already lost a considerable amount of blood.

Transfixed by the horror of recognition, Spock stared impotently at the tableau. *Not here. Not without McCoy to handle this. Not when we can't use....*

He knew what he was planning was not allowed and although he tried to shove the thought to the side, it would not be buried. He was fairly certain he could give a name to this planet - a place declared off-limits, protected by a non-interference directive that they both had sworn not to violate, even at the cost of their lives. For him to knowingly be the one to....

The alternative was to let these people take care of Kirk.

"What do you think, Malcol?" asked the voice behind Spock.

"Useless, Xanard," the medic said, looking up at the man who had followed the Vulcan. "Nothing'll stop that bleeding. We'll have to let him go. Damn!"

Those words brought Spock out of his momentary trance. "No!"

Decision made, his thoughts turned to the shuttle and he headed swiftly for it as soon as he had its location pinpointed, ignoring the shout that followed him.

For the first time he noticed that there was a group of men standing guard near its remnants. Spock surmised that the shuttle had split upon impact, throwing its occupants clear of it.

A word from Xanard caused the guards to fall back and let him through. He pushed and threw the debris out of his way, until he came to the compartment that contained the medical supplies. The bent door was impossible to slide open, so in his haste, Spock tore it off. The supplies inside were jumbled but intact.

Rummaging hurriedly, he gathered up the instruments he needed, trying to dismiss that part of his mind which reminded him of the seriousness of his actions and the possibility of grave consequences. As he grabbed the tricorder, he trembled, hesitating briefly.

Never had he been the one to decide to break the Prime Directive. Yet while part of him rebelled against what he was doing, he knew there was no real decision.

As he turned back towards Kirk, he caught the wide-eyed stares and wished, *If only there were more time. Time to evacuate the natives. Time....*

Yet that was as useless as wishing he were now a surgeon, one with some experience behind him before he entrusted Jim's life to the expertise of his

hands. After all, theoretical knowledge was not the same as the practical kind.

They have already seen the shuttle, he reasoned as he dropped his supplies by Kirk's side. And they were not afraid of us. Did not fear to help.

Excuse. Excuse, retorted the small voice of conscience as he activated the medical tricorder. It was the truth, he knew, but it did not matter, for there was one life he would not give to any rule or regulation.

He was relieved that the carotid artery was only nicked, not severed, and that the injury was just under the jaw instead of lying too deep for him to reach in the present circumstances.

"What are you doing?"

Spock barely heard the question, so intent was he on his preparations. Even so, he was beyond answering, for his mind was busy outlining the procedure. Indeed, he begrudged every moment spent on preliminaries, for he knew that if the medic's hold on the artery slipped, Kirk could very well go into irreversible shock from the loss of blood. Yet he understood that this time was not being wasted, that these preparations were as vital as the surgery itself.

Still, he could not help but be impatient with all the little details.

He reached for a packet containing artificial blood, the lyophilized universal powder that hardly resembled the fluid it would replace. He opened the accompanying isotonic saline compartment and let them mix, gently tilting the bag back and forth.

"What's that?" the one called Malcol asked.

"Something that will help him," Spock evaded, reluctant to reveal too much.

"What he needs is blood," the other medic pointed out.

"Yes, I know," Spock conceded. "This will do."

"It doesn't look like his blood," Xanard interjected, staring at the opaque white liquid.

Spock spared them a glance, realizing that it would be quicker and more appropriate to just answer their questions, especially since he would need their help. "It is artificial blood. Universal type. Can be used with anyone." He slid the rest of the packets over to the medic with the free hands. "Please prepare the rest for me. His pressure is too low and he will need them."

Thus designated, the man grasped a packet and stared skeptically at it. "It will transport oxygen," Spock assured, "and suffice until his body can produce sufficient quantities of its own." Picking up the administration set,

the Vulcan reflected that for all their modern facilities aboard ship, in emergency situations, nothing had yet replaced the centuries-old catheter in the vein system. He inserted it carefully, then attached the bag and started the infusion.

He then poured antiseptic over his hands, knowing that that was the best he could do. As soon as he was ready, he faced the one holding Kirk. "I will need room to work. Ease back as far as you can but don't let go.... Like that.... Good.... Release when I tell you.... Now."

The stream of blood made the cutdown procedure difficult. Spock felt a twinge of panic at working almost blindly, but he finally clamped off the artery below the tear site. When the flow ceased, he breathed a quick sigh of relief and irrigated the area to be able to see what he was doing.

For a few seconds, he worried about probing for the injury, knowing that tears were sometimes difficult to find when blood no longer pumped through them. But as soon as the artery was clean, he saw the ragged edge and was grateful that the nick was small. Had the leak been greater, he reminded himself, Kirk would no longer need help.

Bringing the edges together by hand, Spock lasered them until they fused, then checked the seal with the mediscanner. Still, he knew that any potential leaks would remain invisible until he removed the clamp.

Peripherally, he was aware that another bag had been attached to Kirk, but he kept his attention on what he was doing.

When it was time to remove the clamp, his hand trembled over it, hesitating. He was almost unwilling to release it - for if the weakened area did not hold, this time there would be no second chance.

Carefully, he disengaged the clamp and watched the repaired artery expand with the blood that surged through it. He did not realize that he had been holding his breath until moments passed and his tension eased.

He waited until he was fully satisfied that the mended vessel would hold, then he pulled the flesh together and lasered across the cut, sealing the edges with care.

Finished, he reached for the medical scanner and activated it once again. Pleased with the reading, he ran it over the rest of Kirk's body and was grateful when it registered only bruises from the impact. He was glad that there was no concussion or other serious injury to compound the trauma.

Spock filled the hypo with antibiotics and pressed it against Kirk, then sat back to observe the Human's breathing.

It might be several hours before Kirk regained consciousness, but at least now all they had to do was wait out the shock. Still, he was much too pale.

On impulse, Spock reached over and traced along the scar. The fusion was perfect, but it was quite visible. When they reached the Enterprise -

"Very impressive, wouldn't you say, Suther?"

The comment reminded Spock that he wasn't alone with Kirk and he snatched his hand away. He glanced up at the speaker.

"Will he live?" Xanard asked.

Spock nodded. "He will need more transfusions. His plasma volume is very low at the moment." Having said that, he retrieved another bag and started to exchange it for the nearly empty one attached to Kirk.

When he finished, Spock began to gather up the instruments he had used.

"Nice little gadget," Malcol remarked approvingly as he reached greedily for the trilaser Spock had used on the artery. Balancing it in his palm as if to get the feel of it, he added wistfully, "What I could do with one of these. Wouldn't want to part with it, would you?"

"No." Spock held out his hand for its return, then added it to the other items in the medical pouch he had carried them all in. While he was thus occupied, he overheard a low comment.

"You were right, Xanard. They may be the answer to our problems."

"Not now, Suther," the leader whispered back. "Not here." To Spock, he said, "We can't stay here much longer. By now there should be a patrol out."

"A patrol?" Spock inquired, perturbed by the conversation he had overheard.

"Yes, investigating the flare in the sky. Just like we did. And you're lucky we were in the area. Otherwise, your friend..." He did not need to finish the sentence.

A shadow crossed the Vulcan's face, but he quickly masked it. Acknowledging the truth with a nod, he replied, "Yes, we are both grateful to you. But now - "

"We can talk later. We must go before Lamal's men arrive." He paused as another approached, this one carrying a rifle.

"The men have finished stripping the wreck."

"Good. Destroy what's left. Suther, see to it for me. All right?"

The one called Suther nodded and left with the guard.

"Wait," Spock interjected. "You cannot - "

"We already have," Xanard interrupted curtly. "We can put your friend in the back of the truck. Malcol. Treke." He gestured to the medics, who nodded and started to rise.

"We cannot go with you," Spock began firmly.

"You have no choice," Xanard stated impatiently. "I can't leave you here. If Lamal captures you, he'll use whatever you are against us. I can't take the chance. You can come willingly or otherwise, but I don't think you're in much of a position to argue." He gestured toward Kirk and implicit in the indication of the obvious was a warning against uncooperation.

Spock conceded by saying nothing. Instead, he studied the latest tricorder reading. He did not care for these fast transfusions and the prospect of transporting Kirk an unknown distance in his condition was even less appealing, but Xanard was right; he wasn't in a position to dictate.

"Don't worry," Treke offered in kindness. "We'll move him carefully."

Spock nodded his appreciation, then faced his benefactor. For the first time, he paused to study the man. Bearded and fair-complexioned, Xanard was also tall and light-eyed. He had an open and confident disposition that reminded Spock of his Captain. Judging from the attitudes of the men who followed him, he was obviously well-liked and respected. In fact, he even carried himself with the air of one used to commanding and inspiring courage even in desperate situations or retreat; Spock felt an urge to trust him.

Glancing at his unconscious Captain, Spock introduced themselves. "My friend's name is James Kirk. I am Spock."

"And I'm Xanard, Commander of this unit."

Spock's eyes flickered over the others. They seemed to be a fair-skinned race. Perhaps they had felt a kinship with Kirk that had spurred them to help the two strangers. Xanard's words indicated that they were some type of military unit, but usually official ones were clad in uniforms of some kind. Here, each man seemed to be dressed differently, in clothes that spoke of the wear and tear of living off the land. The logical conclusion seemed to be that Kirk and he had been found by some type of guerilla band, but if so, whom were these people fighting?

"Come with me now, Spock, and let the medics do their job."

With a final glance at Kirk, Spock reluctantly rose and followed Xanard to the nearby trucks.

Inside the truck, the medics hovered over their unconscious patient and the guards crouched inattentively by the outer door. Thus ignored, Spock had time to consider what he knew about this planet. The Enterprise's computers had told him that it was centuries behind most Federation worlds technologically, but not enough to be called primitive. Other than that, there was little information available except that it was protected by the non-interference doctrine. This wasn't unusual since inhabited worlds were being discovered faster than Starfleet could train the specialized teams necessary for investigation without the threat of tampering. But it was curious for a planet not less advanced than the Federation ones whose supplies of rare raw materials such as topaline had caused the Prime Directive to be waived upon

initial contact by a needful-ever-growing Federation. And it bothered Spock that the starship making the initial contact in this case had not reported what seemed to be a civil war in progress.

Contemplation was interrupted by the whirr of engines, followed by shouts from the guards. One threw open the door and the other grabbed at the Vulcan and yanked him toward it.

"C'mon, if they hit the truck..." he yelled to Spock.

The gunfire outside could already be heard.

"Jim," Spock called, turning back to get Kirk.

"No time now," the guerilla shouted as he shoved the Vulcan out the door, causing Spock to tumble ungracefully to the ground. The guard almost fell on top of him, but at the last moment, Spock rolled free. The Vulcan turned back toward the truck, but could not climb in, for the others were jumping out around him.

"Don't be a fool," Malcol shouted, yanking at Spock's arm.

Gunfire was tearing up the ground on both sides of the trucks; there was no choice but to run for cover.

Rifles were no match for the relentless weapons mounted in the plane, but they returned fire anyway.

The trucks were riddled with bullets until all the glass in the windshields lay shattered. Spock gave an inarticulate cry and tried to move, but the intense fire prevented his return to the vehicle.

On the last strafing run before the plane disappeared over the treetops, a direct hit caused the first truck to explode. The guerrillas had to duck to escape the flying metal that tore into the woods.

No sooner was the plane out of sight than Spock was running back to the remaining vehicle, the one that contained Kirk.

Malcol and Treke were close on his heels, but Spock reached the Captain first. A sigh of relief escaped him when he saw that the barrage had not harmed Kirk. Then he examined for damage both the i.v. bag and the miniature pump that controlled the infusion. Miraculously, both had escaped destruction, for if the bag had been breached, Kirk could have quietly bled to death without anyone nearby to save him. Staring at it as if it were the most important item on the planet, Spock considered that there were times when they were lucky indeed.

Consulting the tricorder again, Spock decided to remove the catheter from Kirk's arm. If they ran into any more trouble, the Vulcan did not want to press his luck.

Xanard entered and crouched within their group. "Is he all right?"

"Yes, amazing that it is," Malcol answered, fingering the i.v. bag thoughtfully. Then he looked up at his leader. "What happens now? They know where we are."

Xanard nodded. "Yes, we've got to get out of here fast and hope that we're now too small a group for them to bother with again. We can't abandon the truck - we need it even more. But I'm dividing the men up. If the truck is stopped again, maybe some of the others'll get through."

Stroking his beard, Xanard stared silently at Spock, as if contemplating something he knew the Vulcan would not like. For a moment, Spock feared that Xanard would force him to go with the other men, then the guerilla leader seemed to change his mind. Without another word, Xanard rose and left.

The low sounds of movement brought Spock quickly to the bed, but Kirk had already regained consciousness, was already aware of the strange surroundings. "Spock?" he whispered, as his eyes rested on the Vulcan.

"Lie still, Jim," the Vulcan ordered to forestall any attempts by Kirk to sit up before he had a chance to check out the Captain's condition. While he ran the scanner over the Human's body, he continued to talk, knowing that if he didn't say something, Kirk would not lie quietly. "We are safe for the moment and I will explain shortly. How do you feel?"

"How?" Kirk repeated, then paused to give the room a chance to settle down. "A little weak, I guess. A little woozy." His voice quavered softly at first, then it steadied. "Not ready to take on any challengers, at any rate." He reached for his throat, but Spock's hand closed over his and gently pulled it away, then held it slightly longer than necessary.

The Vulcan then explained about the nicked carotid artery and the loss of blood. "There appears to be no permanent weakness in the vessel, but you should have Dr. McCoy check it out when we return to the Enterprise," he cautioned.

"When we return..." Kirk repeated slowly. "Where are we? What happened to the shuttle? What's going on?" The questions came in rapid succession as his eyes flickered quickly over the wooded structure they were in.

"A small village on the planet Calen," Spock started, knowing Kirk too well to think that the Captain would rest before knowing the entire situation. He recounted the details of what had happened, what he had learned and surmised, ending finally with the confession that he was in technical violation of the Prime Directive.

For a moment, Kirk stared silently at his friend, as if assessing Spock's inner thoughts. "Wouldn't you say that's a bit irrelevant after they discovered the crash?" he asked with a gentle smile.

Spock nodded reluctantly, but did not answer, for he wasn't sure that he accepted that judgment. *After all, he thought, it was I who had castigated*

Captain Tracey for his actions in a similar situation. Right and wrong seemed so clear then.

"And considering that I wouldn't be here otherwise, Spock, I'd be the last to complain, now wouldn't I?" Kirk added, trying to ease his friend's mind.

"Yes, Captain. Still...."

"Still it bothers you, doesn't it?" he probed gently, reading the answer in the dark eyes. "If it helps, Spock, it always bothers me, too. But you do what you have to do anyway. If you keep your mind on that, it takes the edge off things." He paused and studied Spock. When he continued, his voice had changed from concerned friend back to practical captain. "Our cover's been blown, so there's no use in worrying about what might have been. All we can do is carry on from here and do the best we can. You say they stripped the shuttle? What about the emergency transmitter?"

"I do not know," Spock replied, pressing his lips together in annoyance. "Xanard is extremely reticent about what they salvaged from the wreck and will not let me see our equipment. He refuses to return it, as if he hopes that he might be able to use it himself if we decline to cooperate with him. Perhaps you can be more convincing." *You usually are.*

Waving aside Spock's automatic protest, Kirk sat up slowly. For a moment, he remained motionless, tensing slightly, as if movement cost a great deal. Then he grinned a quick 'I'm all right' before he swung his legs off the bed. "Let's go find this Xanard."

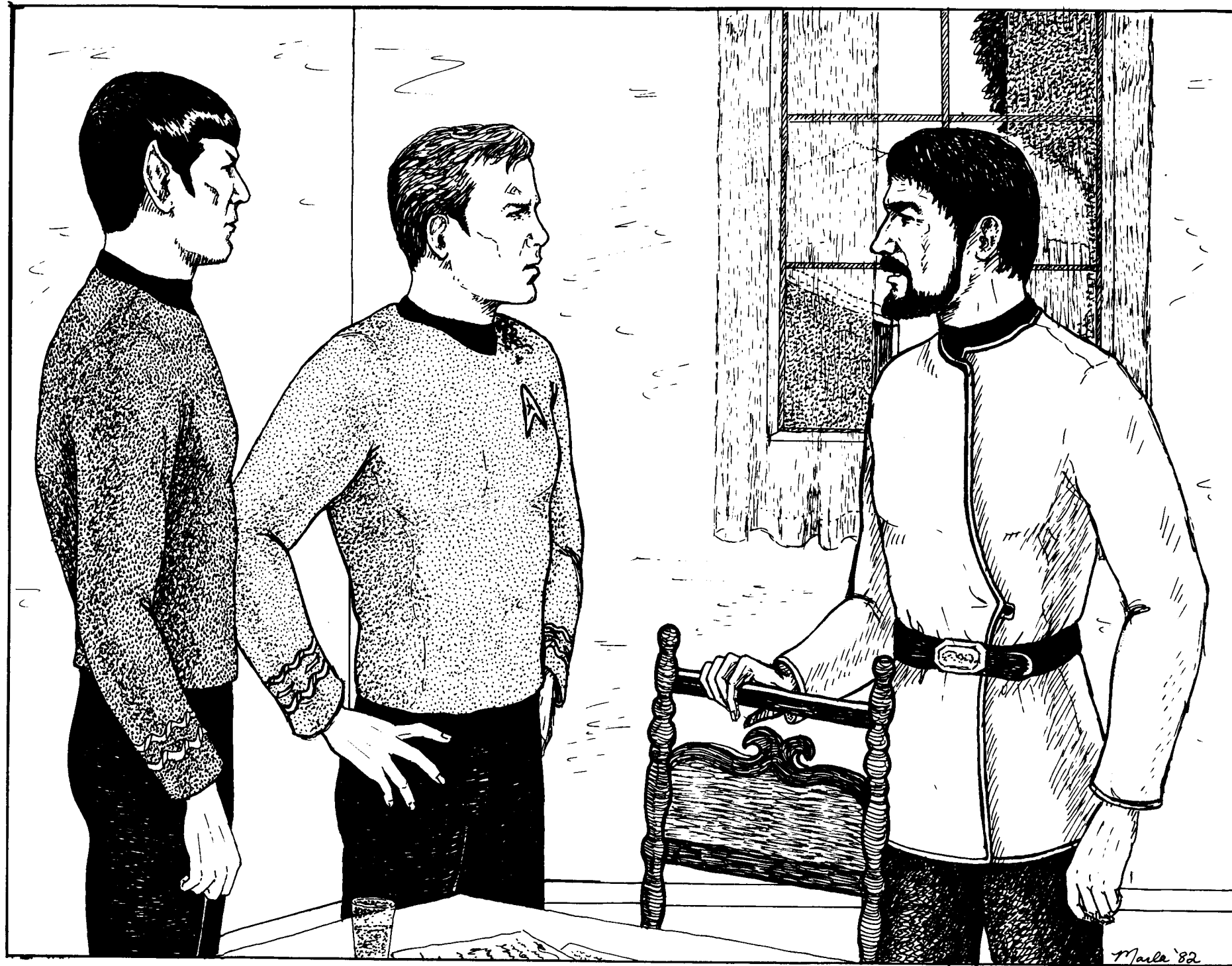
Kirk swayed unsteadily as he gained his feet, but when Spock moved in to help, he waved him off again. Determined not to be dependent, he tightly gripped the bed post until his knuckles whitened, then seemed to retain his energy and stamina. He started with deliberate steps towards the door.

As Kirk passed by him, the Vulcan reached out and held him back. "I am apprehensive, Captain," he cautioned, "that we will not manage to leave here without being drawn further into their problems. And if we are...."

"Yes, Spock, I know," he answered, flashing his 'don't worry' smile and returning the pressure on his arm. "We'll just have to be careful. But first, we have to talk to this Xanard, don't you agree?"

Spock conceded by moving out of his Captain's way, then followed behind his lead. By the time Kirk had entered the sunlight, no casual observer would have known how close to death Kirk had been.

They found Xanard in the room set aside for headquarters, engrossed in conversation with his Second-in-Command. As the two approached, Suther told Xanard, "I'll get on it right away," nodded to the new arrivals, then left them alone with his commanding officer.



"I'm glad to see you up and about, James Kirk," Xanard said sincerely as he faced them.

"Thank you, Commander. Mr. Spock tells me I owe my life to you and I'd like to thank you for that also." He smiled his appreciation.

"Our privilege, sir," the Calenian answered politely. "And call me Xanard. Such formality is tiring." He paused to size up Kirk.

Spock glanced from Xanard back to Kirk and contemplated that it was interesting to see the two of them together because there seemed to be noticeable similarities. Both men carried themselves with an authority that didn't even consider it would be disobeyed and an inner confidence and friendliness that could not be denied. And both men recognized in each other the quiet authority and commanding presence of another leader. It was the meeting of two equals - two men of action - who instinctively sensed kindred qualities in each other. Within minutes, Kirk had visibly relaxed.

"It is the way of men, Kirk," Xanard continued carefully, as if intending to gauge the reactions his words might cause. "Today we help you and tomorrow...perhaps you'll help us."

Immediately, wariness clouded the hazel eyes even though Kirk's face hardly changed in expression. The aura around the Human no longer spoke of relaxed friendliness, but of alert, restrained power, and it was apparent that Xanard also sensed the change in Kirk, even without any visible movements or gestures to go by.

In fact, Xanard seemed pleased with the change in Kirk, as if it merely confirmed what he thought of the man. "Please sit down," he offered, motioning to the nearby chairs. "And let us be frank with one another. I've no time for diplomacy even if I were a diplomat. I'd rather be back tending my ranch, chasing strays, rather than running and fighting. But it seems I'm a soldier now. So as a soldier, I'll come right to the point."

Kirk nodded in agreement, encouraging him to go on.

"Your Mr. Spock has told us you are traders, but you don't look like a businessman to me. You move like a hunter, you face me like a tohgrah."

"You've hardly had the opportunity," Kirk began in protest, "to - "

"To know you? It doesn't take much time to put two and two together," Xanard interrupted. "That craft of yours looked far too sophisticated to belong to traders. Until I looked inside it, I thought you might be two of Lamal's men, with another new weapon against us, but even he doesn't have anything like it. I'd stake my life on that. And those medical supplies - don't tell me they're standard equipment packed for emergencies on pleasure trips. Why don't you tell me who you really are?"

Kirk traded glances with his First Officer, debating what he should say.

Xanard could see that Kirk wasn't inclined to reveal what he wanted. "Should I hazard a guess?" he asked. "You see, I've had time to observe Mr.

Spock. He treats you with too much deference for you to be what he insists you are. And he doesn't look like anyone I've ever met. I'd bet there aren't any others like him...on this planet. That leaves him either a freak or...an alien. Should I tell you which I think more likely... *Captain?*"

Kirk started at the accuracy of the guess, then inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. His eyes met Spock's briefly, searchingly, but Spock nevertheless felt the silent accusatory question and wondered how indeed Xanard had known.

A grin spread slowly across Kirk's face, but his eyes remained wary. "You are an astute observer, Commander. But whoever we are, we're still strangers here."

"Strangers with the power to help us," he insisted, resisting Kirk's evasive reply. "Anyone with a craft like that must have weapons far superior to what Lamal can throw against us. Weapons that could solve our problems."

"Even if we did, using them would be out of the question. We cannot take sides," Kirk stated firmly.

"This is a time of no choice, Captain. Lamal has massacred thousands of people. Tortured others beyond belief. Anyone who even disagrees with him. People dragged from their homes and torn apart by dogs in the streets. He has boasted that he'll wipe us out by Yehneh and it looks like he just might do that."

"Xanard, I'm not trying to make light of your - "

"Do you think I want to ask the aid of strangers? I don't know you. You may come from a people who are far worse than Lamal could ever be. But this is a time of desperation. Rifles are no match for armored vehicles that can mow down a whole squadron in less than a minute. The truck you arrived here in was riddled with gunfire because we couldn't bring down the plane that attacked us. You could have died in there and there would've been nothing we could've done about it.

"When I first discovered you, my thoughts were to salvage something to fight Lamal with. That's what brought me to your crash-site. Our only chance is to somehow get his weaponry and use it against him. But when I saw how different you were...how different he was," he said, nodding toward Spock, "I knew the answer lay in you instead. For you could provide us with comparable hardware.

"Then, seeing your friend's concern for you, for someone obviously unrelated to himself, I had the feeling that you two couldn't be as bad as Lamal. That your people, whoever they are, must have some good in them, if there could be such devotion between two diverse races. That they wouldn't condone the slaughter of innocent people by a meglomaniacal dictator who thinks he's descended from the gods."

"We do not condone slaughter, Xanard. We're as appalled by murder as much as you claim to be, but if we interfere, we could be considered guilty of the same thing in the eyes of our people. You know we do not belong here.

It is not for us to decide what should be done here.

"Return the equipment you've taken from the ship," Kirk entreated. "With it we can contact our people. They can send intermediaries to Lamal. Intercede for you, if you like. We've men trained to make peace between warring factions. They will be delighted to help you reach an agreement, but you will have to request it of them."

"There can be no peace with mad dogs." He paused and looked hard at Kirk. "I'm not a professional soldier, not in the way I believe you are, but we are of the same kind, Captain. Hunters. Predators. Fighters. You're a man I can understand. A man I can trust. These men you speak of are faceless. I do not know them - what they are. You two I can see, know. Please help us."

Spock's eyes remained fixed on his Captain. Kirk was silent, composing his reply, but his expression revealed enough to the Vulcan who knew him so well. Kirk was planning to level with their benefactor.

"All right, Xanard, I'm not going to belittle your intelligence by pretending you've guessed wrong. We're military men, explorers you might say. But as a soldier yourself, you can understand that our actions are restricted by codes. Rules and regulations. I've no authority here, and even if I had, I can't take sides in a dispute I know nothing about. It's not that I disbelieve what you've told me, but you represent only one side of an issue. Here I can only see Lamal through your eyes, not his own. It would be unfair of me not to give him a chance to air his grievances, too. And even if he were here to explain his side, we are still obligated by oaths we have sworn not to interfere."

"You will learn, Captain, and you will see that I am right. Whether or not you want to, you will learn."

"Earlier, you questioned whether our people could become a threat to you. Exchange one master for another, for example. What if I told you that my people span many planets like this one, and that one of their basic foundations of belief is that no one people has the answers for another? That we recognize that each culture develops in its own way and no one culture is omnipotent or good enough to determine the course for another? Don't you see the importance of this? As each man must have freedom to grow in his own way, so must each world.

"One of the ways each of our planets protects that freedom is by preventing exactly what you want. By not giving the military the right to interfere. By not giving it jurisdiction over the internal affairs of any planet. Codes that apply not only to themselves, but to the rest of the galaxy as well. It's the only way to ensure their application. And Mr. Spock and I are bound by them. If we violate what we've sworn to uphold, then there's no guarantee it'll stop there."

"I'm willing to take the risk," Xanard insisted.

"But we are not," Spock interceded. "Consider it from our position. We have no way of ascertaining the justice of either your or Lamal's cause."

Blind interference on your behalf could be detrimental to both of you."

"If you wish," Kirk added, "I'll try to mediate for you. But I'll have to be able to bring both of you together."

"That's impossible. You don't understand how it is. Every day they're coming up with something new to throw at us. More and more efficient hardware to kill and maim. Now there are even weapons that destroy with such blinding light and speed that the people are afraid that only magic will save us."

"There are no magical formulas, Xanard, and giving you access to our technology isn't the answer, believe me. It will only make the situation worse."

"Then you will not help us?"

"Not as you suggest. We can't. I'm sorry." He paused, then continued on, "Give us back what's ours. Once I can contact my ship, I'll do whatever's in my power to help you."

"I could refuse," Xanard hedged, "unless you cooperate."

Kirk stiffened at that, and in a hard, challenging voice, asked, "Are we your prisoners then?"

"No, Captain, you are not. I want you for allies, not enemies. I know that the weapons you carry might help me win a few battles, but two men could never carry enough to win a war. It would be foolish of me to alienate you. We'll return what we've taken and hope that we can change your minds."

"I'll help any way I can," Kirk promised, letting the truth of that statement show in his eyes. "But what you ask now is impossible. Under these circumstances, I cannot take sides."

"None of us want to do that, Captain," Xanard commented sadly. "None of us chose to hide in the hills and forests, to live in hastily erected shelters, or to conceal ourselves in small villages like this one, endangering the very people who house us. We are not bandits, but the situation forces us to become guerrillas as the only way to seek justice and freedom. Good day, gentlemen, I do have other things to attend to." With that, he rose and left the office.

Kirk stared after the guerrilla leader, feeling an empathy for the courage of a man willing to seek any means he could to save his people, touched by the quiet desperation that had communicated itself. "Sometimes, Spock," he commented wearily, "I don't like what we are asked to do."

"It is necessary, Captain. And right, for we do not have the intimate knowledge or understanding of the situation in order to intervene. We could cause more damage. Our presence is interference enough as it is."

Kirk smiled ruefully at his friend. "Enough lecture, Spock, please. I never said that I didn't agree with the doctrine. It's just..." he shook his head sadly, as if to dispel the aura of defeat. "It's just that it's damn

hard to fight tanks with hand-guns."

"Yet your own history has proven that no government can stand against the will of the people. Without their support, they eventually tumble."

"In time, yes. Eventually. But the misery and loss of life in the meantime," He shook his head and fell silent.

And the quiet seemed to magnify the appalling images that rose in their minds.

In the following days Xanard asked the two Starfleet officers to accompany various scouting and foraging parties. Though these were obviously ploys in Xanard's efforts to sway their convictions, Kirk readily agreed to them, because he was eager to familiarize himself with the situation and culture into which he had been thrust. Since it was not in his nature to sit around and do nothing, this kind of participation seemed to be the best way to gain the necessary information. These forays also helped him to build a rapport with the Calenians, a state of affairs he did not actively seek, but welcomed anyway.

When not accompanying Kirk, Spock was busy helping the mechanics repair their vehicles, misfiring weapons, and communications equipment. He rationalized that it would be unethical to not give some assistance after being rescued and housed by these people, especially when their technology was such that he could help. All he had to do was not overstep the boundaries he imposed on himself.

In fact, he occasionally reminded himself that the Calenians could accomplish the same repairs themselves, given the proper engineers within the community, but that the nature of their present life-style often precluded having the necessary specialist nearby. Indeed, the small village in which they were living did not often have the equipment he required, but he noted with interest that usually, within a day or two after his request, the needed tools would miraculously materialize, suggesting a strong auxiliary support behind them.

The one thing the Vulcan found most difficult to deal with was the open admiration accorded him for the diversity of his expertise. Xanard and Suther might be among the better-educated who were willing to accept their guests as flesh and blood travelers from another world, but the lower ranking men and townspeople treated them with a deference that bordered almost on superstition.

It was a constant reminder that they did not belong on this planet and had no way of knowing how much damage their presence would do.

He wondered how his Captain felt about the esteem and constant visibility in which he, too, was held, but was reluctant to broach the subject. Kirk had enough to worry about.

Wishing that circumstances were different did nothing to alleviate the problem and neither did the observation that Kirk was becoming more and more impressed, interested, and involved with these people every day. Often, when the two of them were alone together, Kirk would relate to Spock what he had discussed privately with Xanard. Since these conversations understandably centered on Calenian problems and the predicament Xanard's men were in, Spock found them to be disquieting. He was apprehensive that they would only serve to pull Kirk further into the situation. Thus, the Vulcan would have preferred that his Captain spend less time with Xanard, but the two leaders seemed drawn to each other by some tie that only they recognized. As a result, Spock sometimes caught himself glaring at the transmitter as if he could will it to bring the Enterprise instantly to their rescue.

One morning, Xanard announced that he was going to Estas to meet secretly with a group of sympathetic townspeople with whom he was always in loose contact. He suggested that if Kirk and Spock join the recon party that was accompanying him, they would be able to slip into town with him and attend the rendezvous with his inside people.

Kirk consented to the idea. Xanard had previously explained that not only was Estas a town of considerable size, but was the government's main stronghold. Individual garrisons were stationed in towers along the perimeters and it was from these vantage points that Lamal's men struck the villages and terrorized the countryside. Xanard knew that Estas was the key - that the guerrillas had to neutralize Lamal's power there, or it was only a question of time before the government managed to hunt them all down. But because the center of Estas was built like a fortress, Xanard could not get the other resistance leaders to agree with him.

Thus, Kirk welcomed the chance to assess for himself the validity of Xanard's claim. A meeting with the Estan sympathizers would enable him to quiz them about the fortifications within and around their town and provide him with the opportunity to learn their viewpoint.

Spock, on the other hand, did not consider it wise to get too familiar with Estas, since they were bound by oath not to intervene. But he did not argue with his commanding officer. Kirk had too great a proclivity for leaving him behind when he protested, and even though he did not like the idea of being drawn into an obviously military maneuver, he had no intention of letting Kirk go alone.

After the meeting, Xanard informed the Starfleet officers that the resistance leaders were gathering for a strategy session and that they would go there first before heading home.

They rejoined the rest of the recon party which they had left hidden in the woods surrounding the town and started off. After they had traveled for two hours, they rounded a bend and ran unexpectedly into a road block. The open vehicle provided no cover against the barrage of gunfire which accosted them. Forced to dive out of the vehicle and run for cover, Xanard's party was almost decimated within the first few minutes.

Those who were able returned fire, but soon the smoke and dust hampered visibility for everyone, except for the artillery that fired indiscriminately.

Kirk and Spock made it to safety, but the Captain knew they would have to destroy the multiple-firing gun or the others would be lost. As it was, they were already hopelessly out-numbered.

"Spock," Kirk shouted, gesturing to the left when he had the Vulcan's attention. "I'll take the right."

Spock nodded and waited for the command, balancing the unfamiliar rifle carefully in his hands.

Kirk made a final fast assessment of the situation and yelled, "Go."

Both sprang up in unison and covered the intervening ground in a weaving sporadic pattern that was hard to target on. When Xanard saw what they were up to, he shouted commands to his men to give them support, then headed to join their action.

With their maneuvers perfectly timed, Kirk and Spock arrived at the designated spot at precisely the same moment. Leaping inside the machine gun hole from opposite ends, they moved together without further communication, as if each knew exactly what the other was doing. Two men were clubbed down before the others had a chance to spring from their crouch. The defenders struck out, but were smashed backwards. The rifles were torn from their hands as they learned they were no match for the two Starfleet officers working together.

One leaped out of the hole and Kirk followed him, tackling him before he ran far, rolling with the man in fierce struggle.

By the time Xanard made it to the spot where Kirk was fighting, there was only one other man left standing by the gun, and that one was engaged in combat with the Vulcan. Within seconds, however, Spock had dropped his opponent.

When free, Spock looked around for his Captain. By that time, Kirk had already dropped his adversary. As Spock watched Kirk rise to his feet to face Xanard, his attention was distracted by a glint of light from the bushes behind his captain. Recognizing the flash as reflection off metal, he shouted, "Jim, behind you," as he dived for a nearby weapon.

Both Xanard and Kirk spun around at the warning, but Kirk's reflexes were much faster. He leaped at the still crouching guerrilla leader, knocking him over while the bullet whizzed harmlessly by them. Even though he fell on top of the other and was almost entangled in the sprawl, Kirk managed to turn the fall into a roll onto his side and bring his weapon into firing position. Before the rifle could bear down on them again, its owner was brought down by simultaneous blasts from both Kirk's and Spock's weapons. The recoil from Kirk's gun slammed him back into Xanard, with no time to brace himself against its kick.

Separating, the Calenian gave Kirk a hand up and said, "Thanks. That

evens the score."

Kirk shrugged, then turned his attention to Spock, who had already appeared at his side. He gave the Vulcan a 'well-done' grin before the three of them headed back into the fray.

With the main nemesis out of action, the fighting became more equalized, although even in hand-to-hand combat, the remnants of Xanard's group were still badly out-numbered.

Despite the poor odds, Kirk and Spock fought with a dexterity that astounded their opponents and encouraged their allies. Often, one or the other was surrounded by more than any one man should have been able to handle, but each always managed to swing his way free. In the heat of the skirmish, the advantages of Starfleet training and the natural prowess of its officers over the raw instincts of the others were unmistakable, and neither man had time to consider how much of their capabilities they were revealing by their deadly precision and teamwork. Even the innate grace with which each moved was impossible to miss and spoke of economy mated with power.

Finally, the ambushers ran off into the woods, leaving the worn-out, tattered recon party alone. The moment he was free, Spock looked around for his Captain and saw him hunched over, hands on knees, as if on the verge of collapse. Afraid, the Vulcan hurried over, but as he approached, Kirk straightened and faced him squarely. Getting his breathing and pulse under control seemed to be another matter for the Captain, but Kirk still managed to ask, "Are you all right?"

Spock nodded, then swept his eyes over Kirk with his ever-present concern. "And you?"

Shrugging, Kirk grinned tiredly, then looked around for Xanard.

"Hey, you two were great," Suther exclaimed admiringly, coming up behind Kirk and clapping him on the back. "Where'd you learn to fight like that? Without you, we would've never made it. And when I spread the word - "

"Suther," Xanard cut in harshly, effectively silencing his subordinate. "Make sure the men gather up all the weapons."

"Yes, sir," he said, acknowledging the order. Before leaving to carry it out, Suther once more glanced from Kirk to Spock in open admiration.

Xanard watched the interplay between his subordinate and the two men.

"What did he mean by that last remark?" Kirk questioned.

Xanard fixed his eyes on Kirk's. "Not too easy to stick to your rules and regulations, is it?" he jabbed, ignoring the question.

Kirk glared at him, then turned away before he lost his temper. He leaned over and picked up a rifle, shouldering it before he turned back to face the others. "Spock, let's go check on the wounded," he said, deliberately ignoring the Calenian, and left without another word.

Without further incident, they arrived a few hours later at the small town in which the rest of the resistance leaders had gathered. Xanard motioned for Kirk and Spock to wait in the small outer room, then disappeared inside with Suther.

Spock sat on a nearby couch while Kirk paced, idly counting the number of times the Human passed him. He could discern a hum of voices from the inner room, but even Vulcan hearing was unable to make out the words.

"I wonder what's going on in there," Kirk commented impatiently.

"I am certain we will be told soon enough," Spock responded calmly, carefully assessing the restlessness in his Captain.

"I'm tired of waiting," Kirk snapped, coming to an abrupt halt. He glanced sharply at his First Officer. "And stop watching me as if you expect me to run off at any moment and do something I'll regret later." Kirk punctuated his words by slamming one fist into another.

Averting his eyes, Spock studied the entrance instead. He knew that Kirk was frustrated and found waiting difficult, but the harsh words still hurt.

The ensuing silence was punctured by an incoherent sound from Kirk. Then the Captain sat down beside Spock.

"I'm sorry," he apologized softly. "I'm just edgy. Shouldn't take it out on you though."

"I understand." With that, he met Kirk's eyes, smiling slightly.

"You're right, you know," Kirk continued quietly. "Whatever they're discussing is none of my affair." He glanced at the door. "But I can't help feeling that I've a stake in there."

"Jim - "

"Captain. Spock," Suther interrupted from the doorway, beckoning them.

Inside, men clad in a variety of dress sat around a central table. Others stood against the walls. To one side was a hastily erected easel with a map of installations drawn on it.

From the scrutiny directed toward them, Spock surmised that Xanard had told the others much about them. It made him hope that the Calenian leader had not misrepresented them as something they were not. He didn't want to see Kirk put in an uncomfortable position - "on the spot" as the Captain would say. It was one thing to be an observer at a strategy session, another to get directly involved in the planning.

That apprehension grew as his eyes traveled over the group. Many looked at Kirk with expectation, but not all the expressions in the room were friendly. Some glared belligerently at the Federation officers, making it obvious that they considered the two intruders.

After introductions, Kirk and Spock found seats off to the side where they could observe the proceedings unobtrusively.

Minutes later, Xanard suggested that they combine forces and strike at Estas, but he immediately ran into opposition. One leader protested that they continue with hit and run tactics. It made the enemy spread out so thin, he said, that they couldn't concentrate on any one particular group.

Xanard reminded them that not only was that strategy getting them nowhere, but each time they moved, they had to leave their people unprotected. Such tactics were becoming less effective day by day, for the dictatorship had weapons that could decimate whole sections of towns in a flash of blinding light and even defoliate the very forests in which they hid.

It was obvious that the other resistance leaders did not want to listen to him. Some proposed cutting supply lines and sabotage instead. Those who were particularly proud of their men's fighting abilities suggested that the garrisons be taken and destroyed individually, until others reminded them that new ones would only be built. Even assassination of Lamal and his second-in-command, Zadre, was contemplated, as the hot and lengthy debate continued.

It was soon clear what the major problems were. Each leader had his own answer to the situation and none would give credence or adequate attention to another's idea. They were in desperate need of a singular strong leadership, an overall resistance leader who could coordinate all their efforts and a strong area command. But the hostilities and rivalries between them were too starkly apparent. It was as if each of them had his own tiny kingdom and the only concern revolved around keeping that power and letting no one else encroach upon his territory. Without unity, they were doomed to failure.

Finally, Kirk could stand it no longer. Without considering what he was doing, he spoke up. "You're losing your perspective. You've got to hit them in their seat of power. Once you neutralize them there, the outer garrisons'll fall easily. There won't be anything to hold them together."

"What do you suggest?"

"Hit the center. Take Estas. That's where Lamal is, isn't it? Take the fight right to him."

"You're insane. That's suicide," one Calenian protested.

"You've been listening to Xanard too long. That's his crazy notion," another said.

"No," Kirk insisted. "Xanard's right. Estas is your key. Take that and you're well on the way to victory."

"But we don't have the forces to take Estas. That's what I've told Xanard all along," a third added.

"What about your civilian support? Organize them. An all-out effort involving everyone you can recruit. You also have a viable underground inside Estas - use it. Xanard thinks you can do it and so do I."

"Xanard has suggested that you have weapons that could help us," the first speaker proposed.

"If you band together, you can accomplish your goal on your own. You don't need me. You need a united effort, giving each group a particular task to be responsible for."

"Even Xanard has never come up with a workable plan to assault Estas. What makes you think you could do better?" questioned one from the back of the room.

Kirk walked up to the map. "I've seen Estas. If you attack here, here, and here, you should be able to cripple them."

"But no one has ever been able to take Estas." Murmurs of agreement followed the protest.

"That is precisely why we should attack there," Xanard interjected, throwing Kirk a look of gratitude. "No place is impregnable."

"Rule of thumb is to attack where unexpected," Kirk added. "Lamal won't be expecting you to materialize in his backyard."

"And who would coordinate this major assault. You?" The latter was spoken with a derisive air and the snickers and snorts that accompanied it indicated that there were others who agreed.

Kirk couldn't help but color at the demeaning expressions. His eyes darkening, he pressed his lips together, but before he could say anything, another spoke in his defense.

"These men are our guests, Feret. That's no way to talk to them." These words were followed by murmurs of support from others in the room, clearly indicating how divided the leaders were.

Indeed, an argument ensued concerning the merits of their guests - what they had been told about the capabilities of the strangers and what they could see with their own eyes.

It wasn't easy for Kirk to stand still and listen to their dispute. Schooling his voice to deceptive calm, he said, "I didn't say I would launch your offensive. Xanard can lead you - "

"Xanard? You must be joking. Entrust him with my men?" Feret returned. "I wouldn't trust him to hold their hands in peacetime."

"All right, then elect one of your own choice," Kirk suggested.

"Ah, that's the problem, Kirk," another explained. "We've never been able to agree."

"There must be at least one among you - "

"Xanard, I thought you said these friends of yours only wanted to observe," Feret protested. "Now this one wants to take over."

"I didn't say that," Kirk objected, staring directly at Feret.

"But you do," he answered, unimpressed with the steely glare. "Why don't you admit it?"

The discussion was beginning to fragment into factions, centering around Kirk instead of the issues at hand. It was even submitted that if they would decide to move against Estás, then Kirk should lead them. However, some of the others were violently opposed to this idea.

"Gentlemen, stop this right now!" Kirk ordered. The hard command in his voice silenced everyone. Then he continued in a more diplomatic vein. "This bickering serves no purpose. Perhaps Mr. Spock and I should leave you to discuss what you are going to do. You'll have a difficult enough job as it is, without us adding to it."

Despite the soft words, there was a fire in Kirk's eyes that only Spock could read fully. Still, it didn't take much familiarity to recognize that Kirk was angry.

"Captain, don't leave. You can't let a few malcontents upset you. They - "

"No! They are right," he responded emphatically, glaring at each man in turn. "It is *your* problem, not mine. *Your* country. For all I care, you can blow it right off the map. But I'll tell you this. From what I've seen here, I question what you're doing and why. I feel sorry for the men you lead, the people you've sworn to protect. Surely they deserve better than this. Spock." He turned and strode from the room, expecting the Vulcan to follow him. He did not stop until he was outside the entire building and could cool his temper in the open air.

Once outside, Kirk vented his anger and frustration. "Damn them, Spock! No wonder they can't accomplish anything. Self-inflated egos - the lot of them! What they need's one strong man who'll kick their asses in line. Instead of using their common sense, they treat this as a game. Meanwhile, everything they say they're fighting for goes down the drain."

Spock knew that he had to calm down his Captain. "Xanard seems to be respected by the majority of them and he has not given up. He may still convince them of the importance of striking Estás. Eventually, it will have to occur to all of them that it is the only plausible approach."

"Are you kidding? They won't go along with him, just out of pure stubborn idiocy. They're trapped in their own little ego games. What they need is someone outside their little group - who won't tolerate their behavior."

There was no way to deny the truth of what Kirk said, but Spock did not want that someone to be Kirk. He had feared from the beginning that Kirk's compassion and frustration with the others would lead him to these conclusions and that eventually Kirk would feel he had no other choice. Spock knew that he had to end the tirade now, before Kirk's agitation and inbred leadership led him to assume these people's problems, too.

"Jim, it is their dilemma. Their right to decide. Their planet."

"Yeah, and what do I care, is that it?" He stalked away, still nursing his anger.

Recognizing the dismissal, Spock knew that Kirk wanted to be left alone to brood, but he considered that especially now, he dare not humor him. In this state, Kirk was too vulnerable to his emotions, and if he did as Kirk wished, he might regret it later. "You do care," he said, following the Captain. "So do I. I would like to put an end to this senseless killing as well as you. I would like to put an end to all violence. But if you and I do interfere here, what happens then? What happens to these people's right to initiate their own destiny? Or Lamal's? Do we sit in judgment over who is right or wrong? How do you know that Lamal's government isn't the legitimate voice of the people? That Xanard and the others aren't bandits? Atrocities occur on both sides during any war. That is why it should be avoided."

"Please, Spock, no more." He held up a hand as if to stop the lecture.

That Kirk was feeling hassled by the Vulcan's continual objections was apparent to Spock, and under other circumstances he would have been guided by his friend's wishes. However, he was also aware that Kirk had conceded nothing and that they were still at the same point as when they had left the meeting. "What precisely are you going on?" Spock insisted, determined not to back down until he heard the answer he wanted. "Their words or your feelings about Xanard?"

Spock knew that wasn't a fair question, but there was some truth in it. He knew that his own liking for the Calenian leader made it difficult to maintain objectivity, but at least he had an ingrained training that reminded him whenever he strayed from logic. The Captain on the other hand did not always consider himself bound by the same rigid doctrines.

The look Kirk gave him made Spock drop that line of argument. "If we impose our own ideas on these people," he continued, "then are we not judging a system we are not a part of and have no right to vote on?"

"I'd just like to knock some sense into them," Kirk protested, "not modify their whole society."

Spock sighed. He was beginning to feel frustrated with Kirk. He thought back to the other times they had come into conflict over the Prime Directive and why he had on those occasions conceded that Kirk was right. "Let them handle it," he persuaded. "This is not a society run by a machine that makes the choices for them, that has robbed them of the ability to think for themselves. They are capable of determining their own courses of action."

Kirk glared at Spock, warning him to desist, but the Vulcan ignored him. "This is not the first time we have been thrust in the middle of opposing factions," he continued, knowing that this was his best chance to convince Kirk. "Irreconcilable hostilities exist all over the universe, yet we cannot take upon ourselves the task of policing everyone. The galaxy has many planets that engage in practices I do not agree with. But if we start dictating to any of them, changing any of them to be what we want them to be without just cause, then what does that make us? For that reason, Starfleet is forced to be quite specific in what it expects of us."

For a moment, Kirk looked ready to explode, then the anger seemed to subside into resignation. "Oh, I know what I'm expected to do," he commented bitterly. "It should even be easy for me. My ship isn't in trouble. You and I aren't in any immediate danger. At least not the life-threatening kind right now. And we're stuck in the middle of a living, growing culture, right? All we have to do is hold on, and wait."

Spock sensed that he had won, but Kirk's defeated tone hurt. He reflected how little he liked to disagree with the man beside him. "I do not like it any more than you do," he conceded.

"But you can sit it out, can't you? No matter what happens to these people. No," he negated, shaking his head. "I know that's unfair to you." His eyes held a touch of apology and understanding for what Spock was trying to do.

"Every planet has its brush wars, its power struggles, checks and balances," Spock explained in a conciliatory voice. "As long as they remain internal, aren't we forced to ignore them? As long as the Klingons or Romulans are not instigating the trouble, is not Starfleet right to consider that the individual has the responsibility to handle its own dissent, has the right to self-determination?"

"Pretty words, Spock, and I agree with every one of them. But I'm *here*. Not safe in my beautiful starship flying by a tiny ball that's an isolated speck in space. There, it's easy to gaze on the external beauty and forget what may be happening on the surface. There, it's easy to rationalize that life goes on and to worry about what upper echelon might think of my behavior. But I'm here."

"Yes, I know," Spock answered softly, in complete understanding. He did understand Kirk; he even agreed with every one of Kirk's arguments - in principle. But despite that, he could not show it, he could not let it sway him, for he could not risk the consequences, especially if those consequences involved Kirk in the forefront of an uprising. The stakes were too high for both of them. "I am here...also," he conceded, feeling somewhat guilty that his objections were not based as entirely on regulations and duty as they seemed. He knew that he would have to deal with that inconsistency sometime, but resolved to do so...later.

Kirk studied Spock quizzically for a moment, then smiled. Feeling as if his thoughts were transparent to his friend, Spock resisted the urge to squirm.

"Don't worry, Spock. That Feret person and those like him wouldn't let me lead them if I tried."

The change in Kirk relaxed Spock. "I doubt he or anyone like him would prove to be an insurmountable problem, if you put your mind to it," he returned.

The praise lighted Kirk's eyes with warmth and he teased, "Confident, aren't you?"

"In you, always," Spock confided and noted with pleasure the reaction he got.

What they saw next changed the complexion of the situation. As they prepared to return home, Jarat brought Xanard word that the school in the town of Retar had been fire-bombed. The two leaders decided to detour there to give whatever assistance they could.

Confusion greeted them at the hastily erected hospital and they immediately pitched into evacuating the seriously injured survivors from the rubble. By the time the children had been moved and examined, the night was half-gone. Xanard assigned quarters to the two Starfleet officers and insisted that they get some sleep. Kirk was too exhausted to protest, even though it was quite apparent that the Calenian leader would not have the same opportunity to rest.

Spock awoke to the sounds of a muffled struggle. For a moment, he listened to the incoherent soft cries, then jumped up and hurried to the other cot. Kirk was tossing restlessly, locked in sleep, his face contorted in nightmare.

As Spock reached for Kirk's shoulder, the soft moan of denial cried through the still night. Frightened, Spock began to shake Kirk and call his name.

The eyes opened in unfocused terror and Kirk clawed at the arm holding him, first attempting to shove it away, then when it wouldn't yield, trying to fight his way free.

Tightening his grip, Spock held on, still trying to break through the nightmare, until the bronze eyes did focus and seem to recognize him. He pulled the Human closer, offering reassurance by touch.

"Spock?" Kirk asked weakly, clinging to him momentarily as if the Vulcan were his only reality.

"I am here, Jim," he said softly. "You were dreaming." Although he tried, Spock could not keep the hint of confusion out of the latter statement. It was disconcerting, for never had he known his Captain to be given to nightmares.

Kirk pulled away, seeming to withdraw in the darkness. He turned his head to the wall and the next words sounded muffled. "I'm all right now, Spock. Go back to bed." But there was still a tremor in his voice.

Spock could see the trembling that Kirk tried to hide, remembered the sweat that had dampened Kirk's flesh when he held him. "What is it, Jim? You always say talking helps. Let's discuss it now."

For a long time Kirk did not answer and Spock thought he wouldn't. But the silence between them seemed to emphasize the darkness and with it, a sense of shared security, as if here the soul could take refuge without all the walls of reality that bound it in the light of day.

"The children, Spock," he said and shuddered.

Spock knew how Kirk felt - the helpless hopelessness of what they had tried to do. He could still see the eyes that were empty or wracked with pain in bodies that were burnt to different degrees by vicious chemicals. He could still hear the screams. Little ones who would spend endless days in agony and if they would survive at all, would grow to adulthood deformed and scarred beyond even the aid that Federation medicine could provide. It was the kind of warfare that had been banned long ago on Earth for its completely indiscriminate inhumanity and the fact that it was being used here said something execrable about Lamal's morality.

"How can one ignore that, Spock, and keep his self-respect?"

"Jim..." he started, but where were all the logical answers when he needed them? This planet was costing Kirk too much. All day he carried responsibility hanging over his head like an ax and now it was invading his nights. Spock found himself resenting the Calenians for their effect on Kirk. Yet, he feared that if they did get involved, the price would be even worse.

"Spock, do you think the Klingons might be behind this?" Kirk asked, fingering his lips thoughtfully.

"We have not seen any evidence that they are. The weapons we have encountered so far may be advanced, but they are not beyond the scope of the present technology." He paused, then added sympathetically. "But it would make the decision easier."

Kirk made a sound that was halfway between a laugh and a moan. "It sure would. You know, Spock, on board ship, or even in most of our encounters with unknown situations, you generally have to make snap decisions. You don't even know how you arrive at them, but based on your training, your experience, your feelings, you know what to do. But here, having so much time...."

"Time to worry about all the alternatives, all the consequences. Time to analyze what you should do," Spock confirmed, understanding what Kirk was trying to say. No one had ever been able to systematize the command mind. No one had ever been privy to the processes that gelled into the instant decision, what made it different from those arrived at after careful deliberation, or what made one man capable of handling both types.

"Too much time, perhaps. These people look on us like we're their salvation, and maybe we are. And maybe we're the destruction of all they were meant to be. Power at our fingertips that could end this suffering..." Kirk's voice trailed off into his inner pain.

"Power that we are obligated not to use."

"Are we, Spock? Are you sure? I'm not so certain any more. Starfleet and the Federation seem so far away."

Spock knew his Captain too well to not understand where Kirk's thoughts were leading and he felt a chill creep up his spine. Kirk was never content to remain on the sidelines when people needed help, yet what could one man do to change the inevitable tide of events?

Kirk seemed so vulnerable at the moment, and unbidden, arose the memory of Kirk lying in his blood at the crash. Shivering at the vision, Spock reasoned, "Jim, tomorrow we will be back at the village where we left the transmitter. The Enterprise should be looking for us by now and - "

"Perhaps, Spock, there's a way we can help," Kirk continued, as if he hadn't heard his First Officer, "without breaking the Prime Directive, without using phasers or anything - "

"Jim, hardware isn't the only problem," Spock felt compelled to point out. "Have you considered that your leadership alone could have drastic effects on events here? You've already shown them what you are capable of in hand to hand combat and that in itself is beyond their simple techniques. Command of starships is not the only thing you have excelled at or have had experience with. In fact, the very first action you must take - unifying all the individual units and establishing a strong area command - might even be considered, in itself, a violation of classified tactics by Starfleet Command. It may be the first and most important move any resistance must take to be effective, but it is also the one with which the non-professionals who make up most insurgent groups are generally unfamiliar. Whether or not it is a logical or necessary step does not matter; the point is that these people did not think of it themselves. That makes you a more dangerous interference than anything that could be explained away by the magic these people want so much to believe in. And what do you think Starfleet will think of that?"

"I don't know, but don't I have to live with myself first?"

"Does that include involving yourself in a situation that could very well be hopeless or in one that if you try to play by their rules, you could very well get yourself killed?" It was not what Spock had meant to say, and he wished he hadn't, but the horrifying images of war and the naked vulnerability of the man in front of him were chiseling at his control.

As if he understood what Spock was thinking, Kirk reached out and touched his arm. "Isn't it more important how we live?"

Spock had no ready answer, for Kirk's question had knifed through to his soul. What they had seen conflicted with every belief about the sanctity of life that the Vulcan held. All the compassion within him cried out to help

the oppressed. Yet, those same beliefs also taught him that feelings were not justification for involvement in something that should not be his concern.

And if this were not enough, there was also a frightful premonition twisting at his insides. Although its meaning still eluded him, he had long ago stopped pretending that such things did not exist.

All he knew was that it terrified him. He had watched Kirk almost die once on this planet and knew that he did not want to live through that again. Yet, personal concerns were even more inappropriate than his other objections and though he had more arguments that he wanted to offer, he just could not voice them.

"It's all right, Spock," Kirk's voice came softly, kindly out of the darkness. "I don't expect any answer from you. Why don't you try to get some sleep? It'll be light soon."

"And you, Captain?"

"Yes, me, too. Stop worrying about me, my friend." He squeezed Spock's arm in reassurance, then let go.

Spock rose and made it back to his own place, but he could not will himself to sleep. The crash-site and the vision of Malcol pressing his hand to Kirk's throat continued to haunt him. The Vulcan knew the meaning of hopelessness, for he was almost willing to do anything to make sure that it would never happen again, yet he knew that that power did not lie within him.

Why do you always have to offer yourself? Spock wanted to rage at the Human, even as he felt shame for the unworthy thought. For if you don't manage to kill yourself leading these men, Starfleet is liable to destroy what's left.

Either way it was much too much a vulnerable position. Sensing that the decision had already been made, Spock continued to worry until he was greeted by the light of dawn.

The smell of death and destruction hit them long before they reached Xanard's village. The smoke that stretched like lazy fingers toward the clouds had warned of what they would find.

But the sight was far more ugly than what the two Starfleet officers would have imagined. As they rode into town, the gutted, crumpled buildings stood in mute accusation of their non-partisanship.

In the streets, bodies lay scattered everywhere - some burnt, others torn apart with an arm here, a leg there. Corpses with heads blown off, extremities shattered. Grotesque angles of dying.

The still air was rent with the low moans and weakened screams of the barely alive. Deeply shaken, they drove through in silence to the remains of

what had been the guerrilla headquarters. Apparently, that structure had been among the first hit and was the reason the people had been unable to call for help.

From there, they fanned out to search for survivors, while Xanard set about the task of locating and calling in the rest of his men, those who had been deployed on other assignments besides the fatal one of guarding the village.

The search for survivors was grim. There were the victims of the attack itself - the barrage of fire that blew flesh apart, severed bones at their joints, splattered blood and pieces of once-living substance around as if a transporter beam had disintegrated the molecules and forgotten to reassemble them.

But more appalling than these sights were the victims of intentional mutilation. Men impaled with poles through their chest, abdomens, or lower. Bodies slashed from shoulderbone on down the sternum and around, with guts spilling into the dirt among blood and waste. Women with their legs yanked apart, raped, ravaged, and sometimes knifed until they were hardly recognizable. Children....

The barbarism sickened Spock. Looking around, he saw Kirk crouching next to a body whose gender was no longer recognizable. The Captain's pallor alarmed him and he headed toward him, reaching Kirk just as the Human began to sway.

Spock grabbed Kirk's arm, but the Captain caught himself and stiffened. Suppressing a shudder, Kirk dismissed both his reaction and the Vulcan's aid with the words, "I'm all right, Spock." As he stood without any assistance, he added, "It's just hard to believe that anyone could be so...so..." and couldn't finish.

For a moment, they just stared at each other, then Kirk roused himself, drawing the air of command around him. "C'mon, let's see where else we can help."

The two men joined the others who were weaving from house to house, carrying the wounded. As he went from dead body to dead body or paused to uncover from the debris someone who was still breathing, Spock had time to reconsider the situation. Xanard had told them both that negotiations with Lamal were impossible - that every time they had tried, those who made peace died for their efforts. The Calenian leader had described the reign of terror and what each of them could look forward to if they were not successful against Lamal, but it wasn't until now that it was brought home so vividly to him. He himself had such a high regard for life that it was difficult to conceive of a total lack of it in another.

As a Starfleet officer trained in military tactics, Spock knew that when one side thought itself vastly superior to another, either idealistically or practically, and could sense ultimate victory, then it was never willing to make concessions. Indeed, opposing factions never seemed to consider alternatives unless there was some form of armageddon over them. Kirk had taught him that with Eminiar VII, but like then, he had hoped that there was some

other answer to the situation here. Now he was forced to admit that the only way Xanard would bring Lamal to the peace table was to break his power or to deal him a blow sufficient enough to make him listen. Like Kirk and Xanard, Spock had known from the start that the only hope of equalizing the two factions was to strike at Estas and neutralize Lamal's superior strength and the advantage it gave him. Now he had seen enough to know that this was the only way and that they would never accomplish it alone. If Kirk and he did not help them, then they were sentencing these people to mutilation and death, and Kirk was right - they would have to live with that decision the rest of their lives.

Decision made, Spock looked again for his Captain and found Kirk leaning against a tree. As he approached Kirk, he could see the Human was exhausted, but he said nothing. Yet his whole manner radiated concern and Kirk smiled tiredly in acknowledgement of it. Then the Captain straightened and drew command around himself again.

"Captain," Spock said in a low voice, "I have been back to our quarters. The transmitter and some of our equipment have disappeared."

"What?" Kirk responded, instantly alert. He started back to the building where the two of them had been staying.

After a thorough search of the premises, Kirk gave up. "Very selective in what they've stolen," he concluded thoughtfully. He and Spock were carrying their phasers and communicators concealed under the native jackets they were wearing, but the extra ones scavenged from the shuttle plus the irreplaceable transmitter and tricorders were gone. Yet, the small medical scanners, general medical supplies and instruments, and non-military paraphernalia remained.

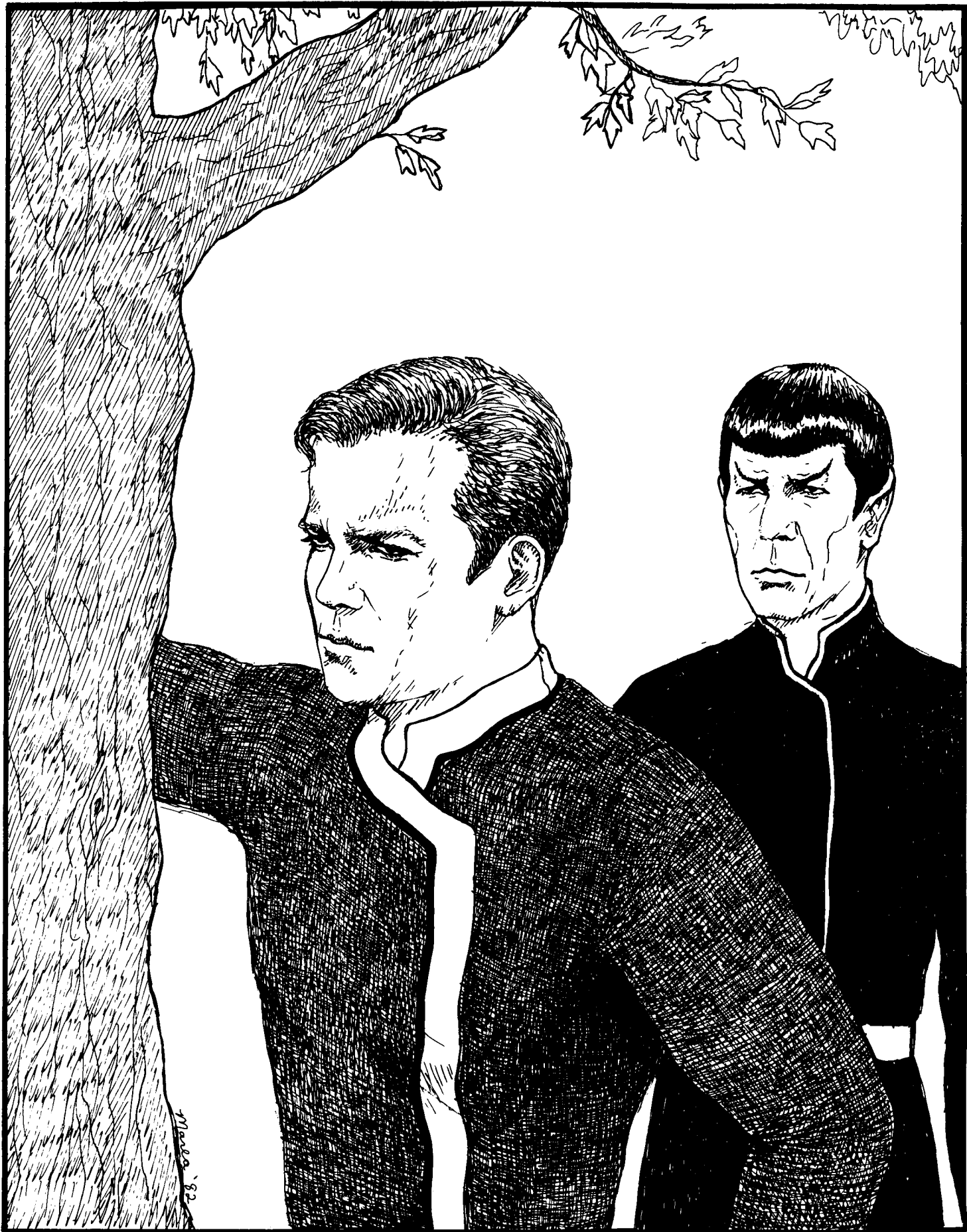
"All the hardware, as if they knew - " Spock started.

"Yes," Kirk interrupted, "I wonder how they recognized just what to take. C'mon, Spock. We'd better find Xanard. I think we're due for a strategy session of our own." He started for the door.

"Jim..." Spock began, but then was not sure of what he wanted to say, of the words that would adequately describe the decision at which he had arrived.

The hesitation in the Vulcan's voice stopped Kirk and the Captain turned to face his First Officer.

The pain in the hazel eyes was almost more than Spock could bear and it effectively silenced him. In them was all the horror Kirk had witnessed, the weight of the inescapable, the shouldering of whatever consequences might result, the regret for what was done and yet to be done, and the steel he would need. In them was also a silent plea, but all Kirk said was, "We have to get that transmitter back." The tone was noncommittal and restrained, but still it indicated that discussion was closed. Then, spinning around, Kirk left without waiting for Spock to reply, and the Vulcan was hard pressed to catch up with him, let alone tell him he had misunderstood what he was trying to say, that neither of them needed the excuse of retrieving the transmitter to do what must be done...not now.



As he hurried after Kirk in silence, Spock wondered whether they would get out of this mess before the course they had elected would break every rule in the book, and what it would all cost Kirk...and himself.

When they entered the remains of Xanard's headquarters, they found the Calenian leader leaning against a window that no longer had any glass, staring into the gathering dusk. He stood motionless, carved in sadness, unreachable as if he had not heard them enter.

Kirk halted and waited, as if loathe to disturb an attitude he himself was all too familiar with. Spock understood also, for it was a singular world of guilt, known only to those who felt that because they were responsible for some, they should be able to protect everyone, and when they couldn't, always looked for the tiny 'what if' that might have changed things if only they had seen it.

Eventually, Xanard roused himself and turned toward them, his lack of surprise at their presence indicating that he had known they were there all along.

"I lost my wife in a raid like this, Jim," he said gloomily, "and I couldn't help these people any more than I could help her."

"You can't be everywhere at once, Xanard, even if you think you should be. Believe me, I know how you feel. I wish there was something I could say to ease your distress, but you just have to accept it as the price of command."

"You know, I can't even remember when it happened. It seems so long ago. So many deaths since then. So many people expecting me to have all the answers. All I am is tired."

"It never gets any easier, Xanard," Kirk sympathized. "But you go on."

"Yes, you do. Until you can't remember what happened yesterday, or was it the day before? Every day brings the same news, new dead. More heart-ache. You think you steel yourself to it, but you can never forget." He fell silent, lost in thought, memory, or pain. "You know, Jim, in grief, like love, there's no measure of time. It follows you everywhere."

"No, it doesn't. You can't afford to let it. No commander can. All those people out there - they still need you. And you are still responsible for them."

Xanard gave Kirk a wry smile. "Another would do just as well - better."

Kirk exchanged glances with Spock before answering, for the conversation had an uncomfortably familiar ring to it. "If you believed that," Kirk challenged, "you wouldn't have been in command in the first place."

"And I won't get any pity out of you, will I?" he lashed out with bitterness.

"Is that what you really want?"

Xanard shook his head, smiling ruefully in concession. "No, Captain, not really. So," he said, pulling himself up to his full height and returning to business. "What can I do for you?"

"Spock and I have discovered some of our equipment is gone. It's vital that we get it back. Do you know for sure who attacked here? Would they have taken the spoils to Estas?"

Xanard nodded. "That would be the logical place. This looks like Xadre's handiwork. What did you have in mind?" He stared hard at Kirk, then didn't wait for an answer. "If you think you're going to make some attempt to infiltrate Estas alone, forget it. I won't let you. Estas is my problem and if you want your equipment back, you'll have to do it my way."

The two leaders faced each other, appraisingly. "I hadn't planned on going alone," Kirk replied calmly, "but now that you mention it, what do you think our chances might be of pulling it off?"

"Are you supermen?" Xanard returned. "Wouldn't you find it more comforting to have a few more men behind you?"

Kirk tilted his head in concession. "And the price of such support would be fulfilling your objective, too. Well, we do understand each other and it seems neither of us has any choice any more. We'll do what we can... together."

For the first time that day, Xanard was pleased. His voice quickened and his body surged with the need for action. "We're going to need all the help we can get. I'll contact the other leaders. Thanks to Spock, we at least have field communications that work."

"Xanard," Kirk cautioned, "we're going to need all the inside help we can get."

Xanard bent his head in agreement. "Suther will make the necessary contacts. If you let him know what you're missing, he can inquire about that, too. I'll send him in as soon as I set things in motion. And, Captain," he said, coming to a halt in front of the door, "whatever you want, it's yours. I believe this'll be your campaign."

"Xanard," Kirk replied, concerned at the words, "are you sure you want it that way?"

"I'd be a fool to desire otherwise. You're the better man for this job, and besides," he paused, giving them a wry grin, "this way, *you'll* have to convince the others." He left Kirk staring after him.

Throughout the whole exchange, Spock had said nothing, feeling that it wasn't his place to interfere in essentially command decisions. But now the two of them were alone, and Kirk had turned to face him.

"Spock, if I could, I'd never break a Starfleet directive," Kirk began apologetically, before the Vulcan could say anything. "But there are times when I have no alternative."

"Captain, you do not have to - "

"No, hear me out before you say anything. Starfleet may crucify me when we get home, but I can't stand by and sit on the sidelines like a good little boy while people annihilate each other in this manner. I've got to find a way to stop it. And right now, the only way seems to be to help Xanard. Perhaps once I get to Lamal, I'll find another way. But I'm going to do what I can to end this...*everything* that I can!"

"I understand, Jim. And as I tried to say, there is no reason to explain."

Kirk's eyes softened at the implicit support. "I know how you feel about this. You don't have to go with me. In fact, you'd probably be more useful here. They're going to need help in putting things back together and you're the best qualified to assist them."

Spock cringed at the thought of letting Kirk face this alone. "Xanard can not help you with the transmitter," he pointed out.

"I'll manage."

"No need. I am going with you."

What Kirk felt showed in his eyes: the sense of fair play that considered it necessary to give Spock an option to do what he thought was appropriate rather than commanding him to follow the path his Captain had chosen, the desire to have Spock stand beside him, and the gratitude when Spock did.

"Right or wrong, I can count on you, eh, Spock?" he said softly, his lips curving into an intimate smile.

"No, because you are right," Spock answered firmly. "I can no longer 'sit on the sidelines' either."

Kirk accepted that answer and nodded his approval. He flicked his eyes toward the door, with the implication that they should get started. As Kirk turned away, Spock added, lowering his voice until Kirk could barely hear him, "And because you need me."

Kirk turned back to meet the dark eyes and let the unspoken forge a new and tighter solidarity between them.

Then he said, "Let's go convince the Ferets of the world what needs to be done."

The room fell quiet when the two Starfleet officers entered, making it

obvious that Xanard had informed the others of their participation.

"Xanard says you have agreed to help us," Jarat expressed to Kirk. "After what's happened, there's no question we need it."

"Yes," Kirk acknowledged cautiously, "but everyone's support is going to be needed."

"Now you're talking," Salar exclaimed, stretching out in his chair and relaxing. "Xanard's always claimed you had weapons that would make Lamal cringe."

Kirk shook his head negatively. "That's not what I had in mind." A few heads jerked up apprehensively as if they were expecting to be betrayed, but Kirk pretended not to see them. "I don't need that to take care of Lamal. And neither do you."

"Then how?" The room buzzed with sounds of disbelief and curiosity.

"First, by putting aside your differences and establishing a strong area command. You need one resistance leader who can direct all of you, who can contact your civilian support and coordinate their efforts, and who is familiar with the underground network inside of Estas and can obtain their collaboration. This is not a time for independent action."

Some of the attendants began to fidget and it was obvious that the old debates would soon commence.

Kirk was in no mood to listen to more squabbling. "How many villages do you have to see destroyed before you'll act like men?" he challenged, letting anger fill his voice. "You're acting as if this were a time to press ambition. Deatar is in ruins. Men, women, and children dead in the streets. Do you wish to argue until your own home is hit, Jonat? Latar? Part of being a leader is putting your people's welfare above your own. Are you doing that here?"

There was utter silence in the room. Then Jarat spoke up, "You are right, Kirk. This is no time to argue. My men and I will follow you." There was a murmur of assent in the room.

"No," Kirk negated. "You must agree to one of your own. The resistance leader must come from your own ranks - someone the underground and your auxiliaries know and trust. Someone the people will respond to. I can assist him, advise him, but I can't be him. He has to be someone the people outside this room will look to for leadership."

"The people outside will look to you, Kirk. Talk has spread wide and in some ways it would be easier if you'd just accept the position."

Kirk glanced at his First Officer, and Spock understood the vexed expression on his face. Turning back to the others, Kirk said in a voice that allowed no argument. "I'm not going to spar with you. If you want my help, I need a man I can work through. So I'm appointing Xanard as your resistance leader. And at this point, I'm not entertaining any objections."

Feret looked ready to fight, but even he could see that he lacked support among the others. The antagonist thus kept his opinions to himself, but even so, Spock knew that Feret would have to be neutralized before Kirk would be fully in control. Catching his Captain's eye, he realized that Kirk recognized the same thing.

"Good. Xanard and I have already been in contact with his inside people. They know what to do, and I now know what our targets should be. Here's how it must be done." He then outlined his plan.

By the time Kirk had finished, Spock knew that his Captain had the respect and cooperation of almost everyone in the meeting. All but the one constant thorn who chose that moment to voice his counter-proposal.

"You wouldn't attack a tohgrah," Kirk challenged, bending close to Feret and staring directly into his face, "by pinching its toes, would you?"

Feret's face became inflamed at the snickers that filled the room. He squirmed and lashed out defensively, "Of course not, but what - "

"Then why do you propose that we do the same thing here?" Kirk cut in, goading him relentlessly.

"I'm not," he protested hotly, but he was trapped, maneuvered into a position from which he could only ungracefully retreat. Mad, he blurted out, "Just what makes you so certain your plan will work?" But the titter in the room made it obvious that he had already lost face.

"Because...it will," Kirk said simply, confidently, in a voice that allowed for no other possibility and owed no explanation. He stared down at his antagonist with a strength that defied Feret to question him, that dared Feret to fight him, until the Calenian was forced to look away.

"You better shut up, Feret, before he thinks you incapable of handling even the job he's already given you."

Spock noted with satisfaction that the display of unshakable self-confidence had had the effect Kirk desired. Feret was counterbalanced and the others were now totally with Kirk. Even those who had been skeptical before were now infused with the conviction that they could accomplish what Kirk said they could. The Vulcan reflected how one by one, each man had been captured by the same magnetism and charisma that inspired the Enterprise crew and himself.

"I can handle it, Jarat. Plus a lot more. In fact, I - "

"Good to hear it," Jarat interrupted, then deliberately turned back to Kirk and continued. "Going over details again, you want Salar and me to hit the garrison stationed in the north tower, while Jonat and Latar hit the south."

"Yes, we'll also hit them here, here, and here," Kirk said pointing to key installations on the map. "Then in essence we'll have them encircled."

In fact, if we strike hard enough, we may be able to bluff them into thinking we have more men than we actually have. If we can convince them that they're entrapped, we should be able to drive against them like a hammer against an anvil. Spock will take the Science Center. Kiekar's in charge of cutting their communications and Talke the airfield."

Kirk paused while the Calenians digested what he said, then repeated what he considered to be the heart of the offensive. "The final thrust will be right down the center, straight to Lamal, fragmenting his forces."

"What?" Salar's head jerked up. "You meant to drive down the center *before* we've taken out the surrounding defenses? That'd be suicide. Don't you think Lamal's prepared for that? Who'd be crazy enough to lead that assault?"

There was a murmur of assent in the room, followed by comments of how dangerous that avenue would be.

"It's the only way...simultaneous attacks from all sides to prevent him from out-flanking us, supporting a center thrust. I'm going to drive straight down their throats."

"You?" Jonat asked, surprised. "You're going to lead the center line yourself?"

The accompanying movements and whispers showed that Kirk's announcement had been unexpected and surprised the Calenians, leaving Spock to wonder if the insurgents thought Kirk would be coordinating the offensive from a behind-the-lines command post. As for himself, Spock had already guessed that that was where Kirk would be. It was the most important, the most difficult, and the most dangerous part of the strategy, and therefore, the one part of the attack that Kirk would entrust to no one but himself.

"And my men and I will be right behind him," Xanard declared, giving Kirk his verbal support. "In fact, my whole squadron would volunteer to follow you, Jim, if I'd let them, but that would leave no one to go with Suther and Spock."

His words brought the desired response and broke the tension.

"But the number of men we have to deploy at any of these points is limited," Jarat pointed out. "Each group will be fighting against heavy odds, even if we do have surprise on our side. If any one of the units should fail to do its job, you'd be sitting ducks in the center. We could lose you. You're the backbone of the area command, like it or not, so perhaps you'd better - "

"You asked for my leadership," Kirk interrupted. "I would rather help you and Lamal come to terms in peace than watch men die under my direction. But I don't have that choice. And if I am in command, I will lead you as I determine. That is not open to debate. If you put me in charge, Lamal will be engaged as I say or not at all. I won't have him use his forces to hit you from behind. And I won't lead troops I can't depend on, or repeat an order once it's given." He grinned reassuringly at them. "I don't expect

any of you to fail me."

The discussion continued, delineating details, but there was no longer any question over who was in command or what strategy would be used.

It took the entire night for the designated units to slip into position, but dawn found them ready and waiting. In the initial phase, Kirk and Spock would drive down the center together until they reached the main complex. There they would split up and Spock would hit the Science Center while Kirk's group would plunge on toward the governmental seat and Lamal himself.

The first light of morning brought the sounds of distant fire as the various groups opened up on the outlying garrisons. Like clockwork, the rest of the units sprang into action, while Kirk held the center line back, waiting until all the others were engaged. He gave the military time to react to the confusion, time to start their units in the directions of the besieged installations, then he signalled to attack.

The engines roared into action and the trucks rolled. Gaining momentum, they sped down the center, pushing their way through to the main complex, scattering the little resistance they met. What Kirk had seen and the others had failed to consider was that by deploying his main defenses around the perimeter, Lamal might be drawn out to fortify them and if enough of his troops were thus employed, his center might be left vulnerable. Kirk was hoping to turn this to his advantage.

The trucks stopped when they hit the main complex; the men jumped out and scattered, bullets kicking up dust around their heels. Now would come the hand-to-hand, building-by-building fighting, where they'd meet the most intense resistance.

"Your target, Spock," Kirk pointed out quickly, crouching for a moment near a doorway. "And where we split."

"Yes, Captain, I know." Suther and the others had already started their jagged run over the intervening ground and the dust and smoke thrown up by the projectiles fired at them indicated the amount of resistance inside. Still, the building did not seem to be that heavily armed.

Just as we suspected, Spock thought, knowing that the same could not be said for where Kirk was going. He watched as one man crumbled to the ground.

"And Spock..." Kirk said softly, waiting until the Vulcan turned to face him. "Take care."

Everything in Spock wanted to accompany Kirk in the assault on Lamal - to be at his side when he charged the palace itself. He knew that Jarat had not underestimated the difficulty of this attack. Although the sally was unavoidable, it was almost suicidal for the numbers they had and for that reason, he knew casualties would be highest there. But it was the only way and that was why Kirk had to be there, and why he had to do what Kirk expected

of him. "You, too, Captain," he returned quietly, feeling the reassuring pressure of Kirk's hand on his arm.

For a moment, their eyes held, then Kirk was gone.

Spock wasted no time looking after him, but headed toward his assignment in a weaving pattern. He would not let his Captain down. And the sooner he secured the Science Center and retrieved the transmitter, the sooner he'd be free to join forces with Kirk. He was determined to do so before the final lines were drawn.

Long bursts of a machine gun sought them out as they tried to cover essentially open ground. Spock's peripheral vision registered the fall of two more of his men and he had to leap over the body of a third who lay dead in his path. Another was crawling for cover and the Vulcan stopped to help him, while the deadly shells hit close to home around them.

There was no time to sit and catch their breaths as round after round splattered around them. Sweat stung at their eyes, but finally some of Spock's unit made it to the interior, the others remaining outside to keep the enemy busy.

Pausing to study the alert guards at the door, Spock considered what he had to do. He regretted the necessity of killing them when the phaser at his side would have rendered them unconscious. Yet he knew that he could not use it in this culture. Though both men were now committed to this course, he and Kirk would still try to minimize interference even if that meant that the two of them were forced to play by the rules of this culture and use more savage methods than what lay at their disposal.

Thus, despite his distaste for what he was being forced to do, Spock gave the signal for two of his men to spring at the guards and render them ineffective. Still, he was appalled when the two lunged and drove their bayonets into the others' abdomens.

As the guards shouted a warning, the two whirled and struck down hard on the top of the rifles with their left hands, ending resistance. Reminding himself of the necessity of what he had just witnessed, Spock lunged through the door with the others. Inside, the soldiers were jumping to their feet and positioning their weapons, but they wisely froze when they noticed the rifles trained in their faces.

The intruders fanned out and surrounded their captives, disarming them. Suther's men handled the weapons almost reverently, passing them carefully among themselves, but Spock paid no attention. Instead, he walked up to the nearest prisoner.

"Where is the equipment taken from Deatar two days ago?"

"I don't know," the man hedged, but his eyes betrayed him.

With Kirk mounting his offensive without him, Spock was in no mood to play cat and mouse with a soldier who could only hope to delay the inevitable. To waste time in banter was unthinkable, so he looked the man coldly in the

eye and intoned harshly, "I will not ask twice."

The man stiffened, reacting as if his pride had been challenged. "I don't know what you're talking about," he answered defiantly.

Without further comment, Spock reached out and nerve pinched the Calenian. As the body slumped to the ground, he paused a moment to gauge the response. He saw the astonished eyes of his followers as well as the terrified ones of the others. As he hoped, the gesture was misinterpreted as a death blow, and he silently thanked his Vulcan heritage for giving him the means to bluff.

Eying the second man, he wasted no words. "Well?"

The man blanched and apparently thought better of being a hero, for he pointed immediately to the double doors at the far end of the room. Suther was there in an instant, throwing open the doors.

"Look at the arsenal they have here!" he exclaimed. "Amazing."

Shouldering past Suther, Spock entered the room. On first glance he noticed that various types of rifles and weapons were lying on tables lined against the walls. A quick perusal located the transmitter and Spock headed toward that table. Lying next to the stolen transmitter were the missing tricorders and phasers. Spock suspected that they had been left there because no one knew how to make them function. He was grateful now that Kirk had suggested the precaution that he defuse them before they cached them with their other equipment in the village. Only he knew how to reactivate them. As he reached out to gather up their possessions, he quickly surveyed the other tables. He was stopped cold when his eyes came to rest upon what seemed to be an advanced grenade thrower. From what they had seen before, this technology should have been beyond Lamal's present capabilities.

Moving over to take a closer look, he noticed the damaged firing pin, the reason for its presence in this room. *Not that much different from those we have, though definitely more primitive*, Spock thought, surprised that the Calenians had managed to develop such a sophisticated device. *If one of these cuts loose unexpectedly against Kirk's units....* Spock spun into motion, realizing that there might very well be others in the city.

He pulled out his communicator and tried to contact Kirk, but all he got was static. Alarmed, he turned to his unit commander.

"Suther, I want you to secure this area. Let no one in here. And don't remove anything from it. Is that clear?"

"But..." the leader sputtered, looking longingly at the spoils.

"I do not have time to explain. I must get to Kirk and Xanard. Now," he emphasized desperately.

At that moment, the explosions began.

"What was that?" Suther shouted, startled by the unearthly whine that accompanied the din of the eruptions.

"Suther - " Spock almost screamed, his eyes flicking to the doorway.

"All right, go," Suther interrupted as the explosions continued.
"We'll take care...."

Spock didn't listen for the rest; he was out the door at a run. The ground he had to cover was laden with bodies and still smoking in the areas that had been razed by the intense firing. The building he was searching for was only partially standing and Spock had to fight his way through the impending debris and fallen men.

Turning a corner, he saw Malcol hunching over a body in a corridor in front of a shambles of a room. He knelt beside them, seeing that Xanard was wounded and unconscious.

"Malcol, do you know where Kirk is?"

"Kirk," he repeated, apparently in a daze. "He saved Xanard. Took a blast in the side himself, but pulled Xanard out before the room exploded."

Spock grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him. "Which way did he go?"

"Xanard would be dead by now. There were too many of them. How were we supposed to know that the room was booby-trapped. Brave man, your Kirk."

"Malcol," Spock shouted, then for the first time he noticed the ugly head wound on the medic.

Before he could consider it, Spock was distracted by the burst of fire from somewhere down the corridor to the left. He had barely gotten to his feet when he heard another explosion. Although it hadn't been accompanied by a telltale whine, it wounded just as deadly, and Spock didn't waste time speculating.

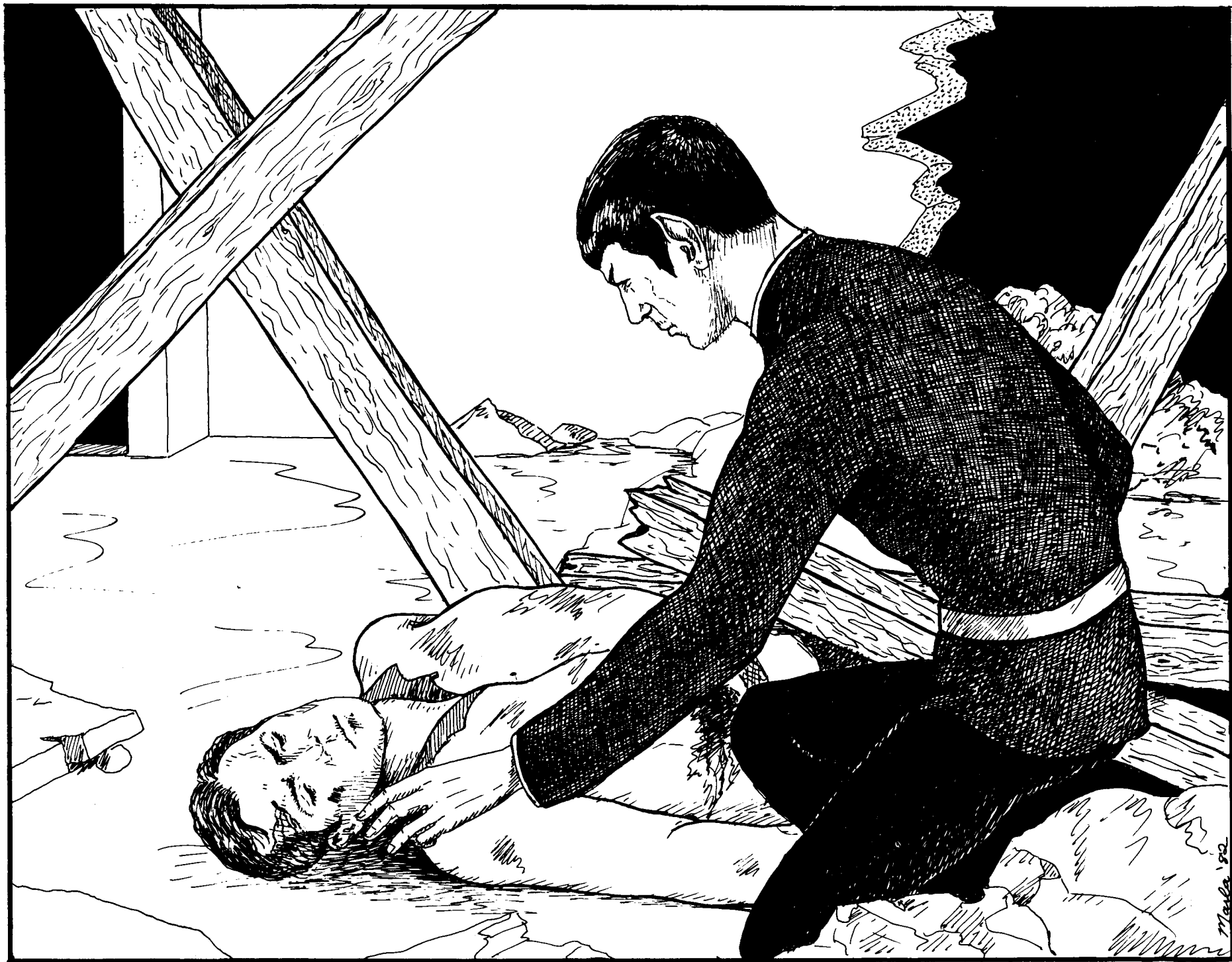
Finally, Spock located his Captain. Kirk's legs were pinioned under several beams, trapped next to a Calenian who was obviously dead. He was bleeding from a gaping wound in his abdomen, bleeding from a gash in his forehead. Under the blood and dark bruises, his face was deathly white, his eyes closed. His rapid and shallow breathing hinted at internal injuries. For a moment, Spock was afraid and almost involuntarily, he reached out to trace along the incision scar.

The bronze eyes flickered open in response to the Vulcan's touch, and Kirk smiled weakly. "As always, Spock."

"Do not talk," Spock admonished, as his eyes surveyed Kirk's position. Peripherally, he was aware of other bodies in the room, but he relegated their importance to later.

"Spock." The word was almost a cry of agony and brought the Vulcan's attention back to Kirk's face. The hazel eyes were dark with anger as well as pain. "Mighod, Spock! They hit us with - "

"Yes, I know," the Vulcan cut in rapidly. "I saw one, but I discovered



it too late to warn you. Let me free you first, then I will tell you about it."

Spock tried to remove the beams, but Kirk cried out in agony. When the pain threatened to render Kirk unconscious, Spock momentarily abandoned the attempt to free him. His mind sorted out his alternatives, realizing that unaided, it would be impossible to extract Kirk without killing him.

"No good...Spock...my legs..." he gasped in pain. "I can't...feel them."

"Don't talk," Spock urged, seeing how much the effort to speak was costing Kirk. "Save your strength."

"Must tell...not much time...Lamal...dead...."

"You, Captain?"

Kirk managed to shake his head, although he paled even more from the effort. "No...we had him...killed himself...idea...to take us...with him... Xadre escaped...our men...get - "

"Everything is under control, Captain," Spock cut in, wishing he could silence Kirk before he weakened himself irreparably. "Let me help you." Spock was already tearing off his own jacket, intending to bind Kirk's wounds.

"No...it's no good...." Kirk clutched at the Vulcan, trying to stop him. "Don't you see...."

By sheer force of willpower, Spock met the hazel eyes and read the weakness there. Kirk would not be able to hold on much longer.

"Responsib...get the men out...."

"You first," Spock insisted, refusing to consider anything else. "Then I will - "

"No...the men need...."

"They have good leaders." But even as he said it, he knew it didn't matter. Kirk had assumed responsibility for these men and they were now his concern as surely as if they were part of the Enterprise's crew.

"Without...Xanard...only you...to regroup - " Kirk groaned and turned paler. "Please...no time...Xadre able...call...reinforcements..." and then Kirk was too weak to continue. It took all of Kirk's effort to remain conscious.

Spock could see the plea in Kirk's eyes, yet still wanted to deny it. At that moment, there was only one concern that was uppermost in his mind. Calen did not matter. Neither did the possibility that Xadre might organize a counter-offensive, and if their men were not ready to meet the enemy, their victory here could be undone. The resistance was one thing, but Kirk....

With all his heart, Spock yearned to stay with Kirk, knowing if he left,

he might never see his friend alive again. But he knew what Kirk was thinking. Bound together as they were, as long as one of them could carry on, it was the same.

"Captain, I...." But there was only one answer to that trust. "I will be back," he insisted, and did not dare to look for Kirk's response. He turned and left at a run, before he could change his mind.

He had not gone far when Xanard intercepted him. The resistance leader was still pale and obviously in pain, for he moved stiffly and held his left arm pressed tightly to his bandaged side. Nevertheless, his weakness was covered by an inner strength that Spock had also observed in Kirk on those occasions when his Captain forced himself to carry on in spite of his physical condition. And because of that, the same automatic protest almost escaped the Vulcan's lips. Yet, he knew that the objection would fall on similarly deaf ears, so he did not voice it.

Besides, there was no time to argue. Spock told Xanard of Xadre's escape. In a few precise sentences, he outlined what Kirk thought Xadre would do next and what must be done to oppose him.

"I'll take care of it," Xanard pronounced, resuming command of the situation and releasing Spock from the responsibility, much to the Vulcan's relief. In almost the same breath, Xanard ordered his aide to find Suther and demanded of Spock, "Where's Kirk?"

The resistance leader did not need to hear any more than Kirk was trapped inside and badly wounded. Interrupting Spock's explanation, he yelled for Treke, who came running at his call.

"Go with Spock. Take whatever men you need and get Kirk out of there. I don't care what needs to be done; I want him out of there."

Treke nodded and hurriedly swung his medical bag onto his shoulder. He gestured to Spock to lead the way.

As Spock turned to go, Xanard touched his arm and stopped him. "I wish I could assist you, but I've got - "

"Understood, Commander," Spock interrupted quickly. That is why *he* sent me out here."

The two shared a brief understanding look, then each turned away to carry out his appointed task.

By the time Treke and Spock reached Kirk, the Captain was unconscious. The medic grabbed Kirk's wrist, felt a weak, erratic pulse and nodded in relief to the Vulcan. But as he considered the situation, Treke's relief turned to panic. Too close to death already, Kirk would be gone before they could free him enough to even try to help him.

"Spock, I..." he shrugged helplessly, unable to meet the Vulcan's eyes.

At that moment, Spock's communicator beeped in his pocket. Since it was

muffled by the enveloping material, only Spock could hear it over the confusion and noise that surrounded them, but to him it was the sweet sound of a miracle. Weak with relief, Spock pulled it out and flipped it open. Disregarding Treke's presence and cutting through Scotty's initial greeting, Spock fired orders into the ship.

Spock accompanied his unconscious Captain to Sickbay, but while McCoy waged the grim battle to save Kirk's life, he forced himself to return to the planet. Deeply worried about his friend, Spock had wanted to remain close to him, as if his very presence nearby could give Kirk additional strength to survive. But Spock knew that giving in to such a desire was inappropriate when Xanard needed his assistance in consolidating his authority. Without guidance, that unity could easily fragment into squabbling factions again.

This is Jim's commitment, Spock reminded himself firmly, and I will not see his efforts fail because he is not able to personally assist them. Someone has to show Xanard how to organize his people to protect and maintain the power they have obtained or they will be easily defeated.

The Vulcan would have preferred that someone to be Kirk himself, for it would be tricky business to equip Xanard with the knowledge to survive without revealing too much. Kirk was the better one to handle such situations. Yet, in Kirk's absence, Spock would do what Kirk would wish to be done, for they were both committed. He also felt that Xanard deserved the chance to return the confidence his people had bestowed upon him, and as long as Xanard's people stood behind the movement, it deserved to be given a fighting chance at survival. *And I intend to see that they get it,* he vowed silently.

Through the seemingly endless hours during which he awaited word from Sickbay, Spock stayed at Xanard's side, offering advice and suggestions in stabilizing his command and establishing a viable government.

As soon as Spock entered Sickbay, he could hear the argument taking place in the inner room.

"C'mon, Bones, you've kept me cooped up here for a week already."

"And here is where you stay. In case you don't realize it, you almost died a week ago and you still aren't strong enough to go traipsing all over a planet."

"I don't want to go *traipsing* all over, just down to see Xanard. To see how he's doing."

"What's wrong with the reports Spock brings you? He describes everything in detail. By now, you should know every rock down there."

"It's not the same thing as seeing for myself, you know that, Bones. Just how long do you think Starfleet's going to let us stay here - no matter what Spock told them? There may be something I can contribute - ah, Spock."

Kirk smiled as the Vulcan entered the room and approached his side.

"You are looking better," Spock said, allowing the pleasure he felt as a result of that observation to soften his voice. The familiar argument had reassured him that Kirk was indeed better.

"Tell that to the good doctor here," Kirk grumbled, trying to feign a glare of annoyance at the medical officer. "How are things on the bridge?"

"The ship is running smoothly. Situation normal, no problems," Spock reported, then looked uncomfortable. Under Kirk's penetrating gaze, he shifted involuntarily. "We did get a message from Starfleet," he finished reluctantly, realizing that the Captain never missed any nuances.

The hazel eyes flicked quickly to McCoy, then rested once again on Spock. "And they insist we finish up here and return home, don't they?"

Spock glanced from the Captain to McCoy, then back to Kirk again. Actually, he had been surprised that he had been able to convince Starfleet at all of the necessity of remaining in orbit, but he had done his best, knowing that Kirk would not wish to leave without easing his mind in person that the Calenians would have a fighting chance to determine their own destiny. "More than insist, Jim," he pointed out.

The Captain turned to McCoy. "That tears it, Bones. You've got to release me now. Let me go down to see Xanard before we're forced to warp out."

"Well - " McCoy began, considering the idea.

"Bones, please," Kirk coaxed. "You can come down and keep an eye on me if it makes you feel better."

"And if I don't agree, you'll just keep on pestering me. All right, but don't get any brilliant idea to check out the front lines or whatever he's doing down there. Just getting you down there and back here on your own two feet is going to be enough," McCoy warned. "And then it's back to bed or you'll never be in shape to face Starfleet."

Kirk winced at the thought of the debriefing he had yet to face concerning his actions on Calen. It was not something he was looking forward to. Then he turned to the Vulcan. "Contact Xanard, Spock. Let him know we're coming."

"And tell him to make it brief," McCoy added firmly.

This time the Captain did glare at him.

The three Enterprise officers beamed directly into Xanard's private office. As soon as materialization was completed, Spock and McCoy moved to help Kirk. The Captain swayed from vertigo, but recovered quickly, then shook his head almost imperceptibly, declining any further support.

Noting that Kirk's eyes seemed too darkly brown against the pale skin, Spock continued to worry. *McCoy is right*, he thought. *He is still too weak. He should not be out of bed.*

"That's a nice trick to master, Jim," the lone occupant of the room said approvingly. "Too bad you can't teach it to me. Then I'd never have to worry about how to get anywhere. Although from your appearance, I'd say it's somewhat unsettling."

"That's what I always say," McCoy complained. "And no one ever listens to me."

"Xanard, this is my Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Leonard McCoy."

"Ah, the 'bully' Spock says you've complained about. The one who insists you remain in bed for so long," he teased.

Catching the look that passed between Xanard and Kirk, Spock had the feeling that the Calenian leader would also make a difficult patient. He could not recall seeing Xanard rest since the take-over of Estas, even though his own wound could not yet be fully healed.

"And who wouldn't have let him out at all if he knew what the Captain was saying behind his back," McCoy returned, turning to include Spock in his glare. "And just wait until the next time I get *you* in my hands, Spock."

Both Kirk and Xanard laughed. "Seriously, Jim, it's good to see you," Xanard said. "I've been concerned. Spock's been bringing us constant reports, but seeing you in the flesh is far more reassuring."

"Thank you, Xanard," Kirk smiled. "Spock's been giving me reports, too." He glanced to the side and met Spock's gaze briefly, fondly. "Even consulted me once or twice for my advice," he baited devilishly.

"Once or twice?" the Vulcan countered with a long-suffering look. "No matter how detailed the description, he is still not satisfied. He still insists on inspecting the situation himself."

"Commander's prerogative, Spock. I know it well." Then he turned to Kirk. "Spock's been a great help to us, Jim. After being the hunted for so long and having to strike wherever we could, this is rather new to us. I don't think we ever really thought this day would happen, so we never made extensive contingency plans."

"You're not home free yet, Xanard," Kirk cautioned.

"Yes, I know, but I don't think Xadre's going to pose a grave problem. He's already tried once, but I sent Jarat, Talke, and Feret out to engage him."

Without Estas and all its surrounding garrisons, it is now his fire-power that is limited. What's left of the army may still be loyal to him, but that won't last. Our position has changed. I've assigned some units to rear area security missions and he'll see how effective they can be. He'll find we haven't forgotten anything we've learned in our years on the run."

"If you can keep him busy until you finish mobilizing your civilian population behind you, you should be able to neutralize Xadre. Spock tells me morale is good."

"Yes, now they can see what they can do. Now they know what's possible to achieve. But it has brought me a whole new set of problems. Once I had to worry about convincing other guerrilla leaders to support me; now I have to fashion independent spirits into conventional troops. I have to concern myself with rebuilding instead of destroying, governing instead of fighting."

"But it's far more rewarding," Kirk emphasized. "And perhaps you'll get back to that ranch you talked about."

Xanard grinned. "Well, at least it's a welcome change."

"And I have no doubt you will succeed."

Xanard continued to talk about his plans, describing what he had already done and what he still needed to do. As he listened, Spock watched Kirk, noticing the approval in his demeanor. Kirk had relaxed, his apprehensions over the Calenians' fate had eased. But as time went on, Spock could see the strain that was claiming Kirk and was not at all unhappy when McCoy insisted that they return to the Enterprise.

"Someday, I'd like to see that starship of yours," Xanard wished, extending his arm to Kirk in the Calenian gesture of brotherhood.

Kirk grinned and clasped Xanard's arm. "I think I've enough to explain to upper echelons already. But someday, I believe you will see her. Just don't go wishing for it too soon."

Xanard sighed. "We're a long way from that. There's too much to be done here first. Too much to be accomplished before we can even consider reaching for the stars."

"Yet, I have every confidence that someday you will make it," Kirk asserted sincerely. "Or at least your children will." He then nodded to Spock to signal the ship, and this time he didn't reject the unobtrusive help.

Spock's thoughts returned to the present and he watched Kirk swimming with grace and ease. The trip home had been uneventful, giving Kirk adequate opportunity to recuperate and Spock time to rejoice in the realization that once again they had managed to cheat fate, to deny her a victim.

Even facing Starfleet had proven to be less difficult than Spock had ex-

pected. As he recalled how Kirk had defended the necessity of their intervention, he remembered how much he had admired his Captain's argument. By describing in graphic detail the conditions and blatant extermination on the planet, Kirk had made the admirals on the board feel the horrors of that suppression, had made them empathize with the frustrations and hopelessness of fighting an enemy whose military capabilities far exceeded one's own. The vivid pictures of what they had witnessed and what needed to be done reminded him that desk-bound as they were, it was not easy for them to experience the agonies of a people at the hands of a powerful dictator. They had listened when Kirk had suggested that it wasn't enough for Starfleet to prevent Klingon or Romulan tyranny, for subjugation in any form when it could be prevented was abhorrent to the ideals and codes of which the Federation had been established.

In the end, the admirals had determined that although the non-interference doctrine had been established so the Federation members could not use their superior strength to force their life-styles on others, it was also not designed to be used as a silent mandate to condone brutality and exploitation, nor was it intended as a prohibition to prevent Starfleet from aiding people who desperately needed help. They had agreed that use of Starfleet's superior strength for such purposes had to be dictated by the morality and justice of the people who inhabited the Federation and by the fundamental humanity which was the foundation of such doctrines. Pain and torture were universally recognizable regardless of the politico-social system people lived under, and if Starfleet turned blind eyes on their employment, then all talk of freedom and justice within the Federation was meaningless.

Finally, they concluded that while they could not have their Starship Captains blatantly disregarding the rules and regulations that had been established as guidelines to dispense the intrinsic morality and justice of the Federation, those rules and regulations had to be flexible enough to be modified when they did not reflect the spirit of what had been meant in the first place. And that it was precisely for this contingency that Starfleet trained its Starship Captains so extensively: for they had to know when those rules must be obeyed to the letter and when regulations had to be modified to dispense justice. That once this type of situation arose, Starfleet had to rely on that training, had to trust the morality and integrity of the men it had entrusted with such power and had to stand behind the judgment of the officers it selected for these roles, for it was the Starship Captain who was there, on the scene, in direct contact with what was and what should be.

Following the debriefing, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy had chosen this beach for the authorized shore leave. And it was here where Spock was forced to review the 'rules and regulations' that guided his own life and to contemplate on his individual responsibility toward them. The Calenian situation had brought into question the whole concept of individual responsibility and blind obedience to the codes by which they lived, not only on a professional level, but in his case, on a personal one as well.

Disturbed by these thoughts, Spock's gaze returned to the lone figure

cutting through the waves with graceful movements and he was once again struck by the fragility of life. Tomorrow could so easily bring the end to everything.

Isn't it more important how we live?

Kirk's words came back to Spock and he knew that if tomorrow did bring the end of everything, he would not be able to live with himself for the things he had not done. Kirk and he had shared heart, mind, and soul, baring their innermost thoughts, needs, and desires. But there was more than even that to the joy of living.

He realized that the rigid codes of conduct he imposed upon himself were sometimes detrimental to the person he could be - that he sometimes hid rather blindly behind Vulcan restrictions rather than choose the path most beneficial to himself as an individual. That path did not have to make him less a Vulcan, but it also did not have to be as restrictive: the options were totally up to him and the morality he would set up for himself.

If he chose, he could let himself laugh and sing, grateful that he still had that most special friend with which to share. He could let his heart overflow with the joy of that togetherness, knowing how precious time was. Life did not always give desirable alternatives, but there were some valuable things they were free to choose. And they had the here and now. They were together and alone. With no one to intrude upon their sharing time.

So lonely and solitary he looks out there by himself against the waves, Spock contemplated as he watched Kirk. And Spock knew that it was wrong for Kirk to be alone. Kirk was always so understanding, so attuned to him, never doing anything consciously that would embarrass him. But there was another whole world of sharing out there in the joy of living that they had never explored because Spock himself was afraid. There were all those little light-hearted idiosyncracies that had no foundation in logic, but made each day truly a wonder to behold.

One of these days, you're going to do something for the pure fun of doing it, Spock recalled and smiled to himself. *And for the enjoyment of doing it together,* he added.

He stripped down to his briefs and headed toward the water. It was colder than he would have liked, but he did not really care. As he started to swim toward his friend, he saw Kirk stop and wait for him to catch up.

Neither said anything, but Kirk's radiant smile was answer enough for him. Spock's eyes twinkled as he returned the warmth in kind, diving quickly and unexpectedly for Kirk's legs. Taking Kirk completely by surprise, he brought the Human crashing through the water with a complete lack of grace.

As the water began to buoy them up again, he let go his quarry and gained his feet. Heading top speed for shore, he heard the uncontrollable laughter, and knew that Kirk was not far behind him.

"You're going to get it, Spock." The warning floated toward him between chuckles.

Kirk caught him with a flying tackle right at the water's edge. With Kirk's arms wrapped around his knees, Spock lost his balance and they both fell together, the waves washing over them and their merriment.

After a moment, Kirk rolled off the Vulcan and leaned up on his elbow, his mirth gradually fading away. A look of confusion replaced the warm laughter in the hazel eyes, asking the question the voice would never mention.

Spock knew he would have to answer it. Searching for a way to tell this friend that there were no boundaries on the love he had for him, Spock was distracted by an eagle soaring high and free in the sunlit sky. The bird flew as if it had no ties to the ground beneath it, as if it could reach even beyond the world it knew, as if there was nothing beyond its grasp, no restrictions on its life.

The Vulcan felt, rather than saw Kirk's gaze following his own. In silence they both watched the graceful creature soar and dive, reveling in the freedom that admitted no shackles.

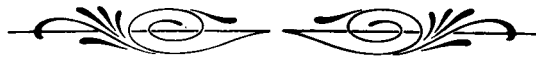
When Spock turned to look at Kirk, he saw the understanding in the amber eyes. There was no longer any need to explain the obvious.

Kirk laughed and slapped Spock on the stomach. "Race you home, Spock," he grinned devilishly. In the same motion, he leaped to his feet and took off.

Spock raced after him, exhilarated by the unique friendship they shared and anticipating with eagerness the limitless vistas left to be explored.

On the dreams of such a bright future, he overtook his Human, reached out, and brought Kirk tumbling into the sand, rolling over and breaking his fall.

For a moment, the ever present protectiveness asserted itself and Spock feared that he might have hurt Kirk. Then he was greeted with delighted laughter as Kirk extricated himself. "Does this mean that you've won, Spock?"



Kirk relived the terror and frustration he had felt then. But, he smiled now, the fates had been kind. Spock had survived; we all had, and so we honor him tonight....

BEVERLY VOLKER: CONTACT 2

And A Star To

*Come sit with me and listen with your heart
To the wild ramblings of a man unsure.
Though I do fear, my friend, that once I start,
I'll hold you longer than you can endure.*

*The stars, they say, are meant for younger men --
The fresh-faced youths who come into the fold,
Who still retain that innocence, that yen
For dangerous delights and battles bold.*

*Once I was young like that. I knew the wild
Impatience to confront the unseen foe
And make a friend of him. I was beguiled
By altruism in that long-ago.*

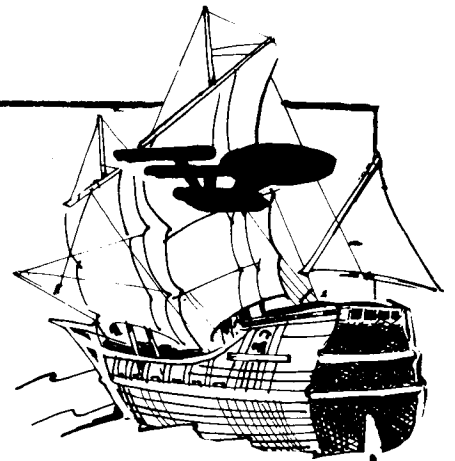
*As time went by, I found a different truth:
That nothing stays the same, that people must
Develop past those brave ideals of youth.
But still this truth did not gainsay my trust.*

*The very brightest part of all those years
Spent in pursuit of dreams of happiness
Was finding you, my friend, amidst the tears
And laughter of adventure's sweet largesse.*

*So much I valued all the things we shared;
Each day together did our friendship prove.
So much it meant to me to know you cared
Enough to let your caring turn to love.*

*Thus, when it ended -- suddenly you left --
I was a poor pariah lost, outcast
From everything of worth. I was bereft;
I felt the grief of all the ages past.*

Steer Her By



*In time, I slowly came to understand
What had gone wrong, why our lives went astray.
And gradually, like markings etched in sand,
I managed all my hopes to wash away.*

*In grey ennui I drifted through a haze,
Until that day when fortune called on me
To face that strange leviathan, that maze
That brought you back again and made us free.*

*But now I find myself assailed by doubt,
Even by fear. Do I still have the power,
The charismatic force to lead, without
Relying just on memory's false dower?*

*Did folly make me come back to this place?
I missed my ship -- my home -- so sharply; yet
I wonder if accepting fate with grace
Would be the wiser choice. Could I forget?*

*No. How could I have stayed bound to the Earth
By steel-strong chains, though they could not be seen?
Only among the stars my life has worth,
And only you can keep my senses keen.*

*Though bodies may grow old and start to fade,
Though drawn to question if we still can strive,
Our spirits never have to feel betrayed,
For love will always keep the dream alive.*

ELLEN L. KOBRIN



Vulcan's Pledge

You never asked for promises,
You never doubted, or questioned
Or judged.
You saw me as I am
And more --
You looked deeper,
To see all that I never once
Suspected
I could be.
Thus, to you
I pledge freely,
And with joy
All gifts of which I'm capable:
To serve at your side
In the starlight,
To follow you even to death,
To be your shield,
Your companion,
Your friend.
We shall face all the forces
Of evil, created by
Aliens and man,
We shall gamble together
For all the universe has to offer,
Live grand dreams,
Dream grand tomorrows...
Yet, if space and time converge
For me,
In the place where my life must end,
I pledge
To wait and to trust
In forever,
Till we stand side by side
Once again.

MARTHA J. BONDS



Journeyman

Carol A. Frisbie
&
Susan K. James

*We vainly wrestle with the blind
belief that ought we cherish,
Can ever quite pass out of utter grief
and wholly perish.*

ROBERT FROST

He felt he was slipping, stumbling, falling into the abyss, an endless spiraling fall in screaming fear, until he crashed into the jolting cold of awakening.

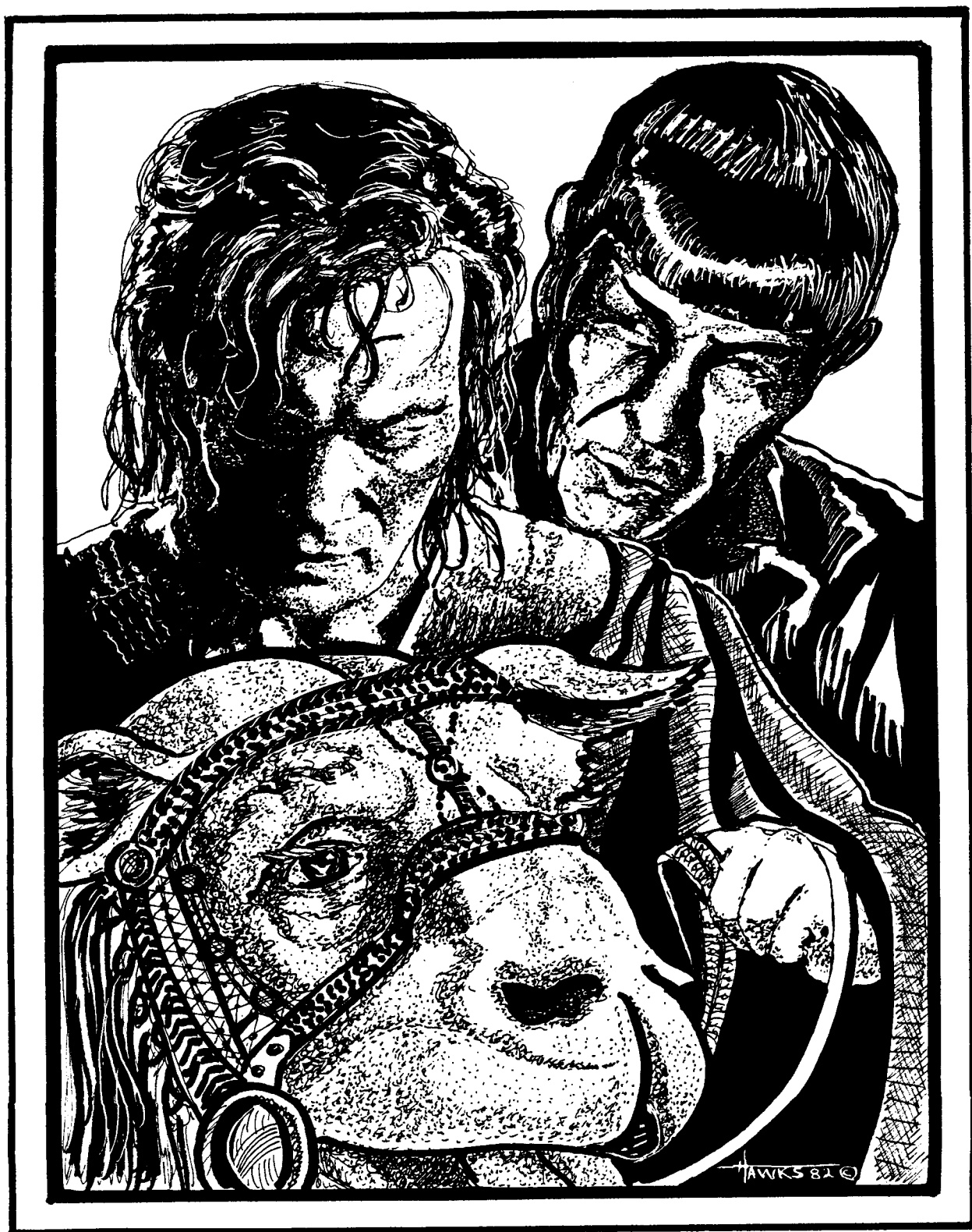
Weak and sweaty from uneasy sleep, he pulled up in the saddle, trying to straighten his cramped arms and legs. The unpaved road wound before him long and dusty, strewn with barren winter-sticks and patches of burnt grass, only the grey of volcanic rocks disrupting the monotony of the dying land.

A road leading nowhere.

Nausea washed through his weakened body and he slumped, leaning heavily into the other's supporting arms. The gait of their beast jerked him with every ungainly step, and with lip-biting effort he stifled a moan as agony shot through his bones.

They were lost. Had been for months now - Spock would know the count to the second, he thought with a ghost of old smiles - lost on this godforsaken planet as backward as medieval Earth. Unable to find the shifting portal, to capture the pattern of their return.

Home. The word collected in his mouth bitter as bile, hollow as longing without hope. After days of trial, weeks of failure, he knew the fabric of time/space to be irreversibly ruptured. They were trapped - and there was no road leading home.



His hand slipped from his lap - Spock held the reins, he'd been too worn for days - and his fingers bumped into the pouch dangling from the gamal's bony side... a couple of thin, hand-woven blankets, a sheepskin vest, some dry meat and bread a worn change of shirts. On the other side, carefully wrapped, hung their leather waterbag and a lantern, now empty of oil. The sum total of their earthly possessions in a hostile world, he thought wryly - that, and each other.

Spock. The name, a surge of warmth, suddenly turned alien on his tongue and he shivered, fingers of the chilling wind caressing his flesh through the cheap, threadbare jacket.

Stiffly, he pulled himself free of the possessive embrace and glanced back at Spock. "Let's stop for a while," his voice cracked, "and rest."

Incomprehension distorted the symmetry of the familiar features. "Rest? We have not the time, Captain. It is of utmost importance that we continue on to Sun-01 before nightfall and attempt the portal again." There was an almost cheerful intonation to the words, and Kirk turned his head, unable to face Spock's self-delusion, finding the glint of hope-colored expectation unbearable.

Again... another road, another village, another failing attempt to find a gateway that both knew no longer existed; while curious, probing, indifferent gazes followed them, sometimes pitying, often intruding... always strangers. And then the road - again.

No, he couldn't. He was tired, so tired. The Vulcan's eerie, tight-lipped half smile hovered above him, and he gave an audible grunt. A shadow crossed the hazel of his eyes for a moment, then with a cry of pain he slipped from the saddle, before Spock had a chance to catch his lax body.

He sank to his knees, and softly collapsed into unconsciousness.

◉ ◉ ◉

The shack was dimly lit, the solitary flame of a candle casting shaky, tumbling shadows on the dull, crack-sown walls. The air was heavy with the scent of raw sheepskins; wet, musty wood; and a stale smell of cooking.

Weary, he kept his eyelids closed for another minute, hiding behind their peaceable silence. Spock, apparently, had done it again - begged shelter. He was becoming surprisingly, alarmingly, adept at it: convincing, cajoling, even lying when necessary. All for Kirk's sake.

The gamal he had stolen, as he had much of their food. Shelter for the nights they did not sleep in the open, he had begged for. The luxury of a warm vest for Kirk was their only possession Spock had worked for - two days hard labor, at the end of which the Vulcan was edgy with impatience, driven with desire to be back on the road.

"Jim?"

Unwillingly he opened his eyes, resentful of the intrusion. Spock was by his side, gathering his shoulders, helping him sit up. He held a steaming plate in his hand, an encouraging smile on his lips.

The whitish mess of food made Kirk's stomach turn, hitting him with a new wave of queasiness, focusing behind his temples in a throbbing ball of fire. Weakly he pushed the proffered plate away and fell back on the bed. It was hard, covered with smelly, dirt-brown skins, only his rolled-up blanket serving as a headrest.

Spock rose and stood at the window, impatient eyes surveying the outworld. Kirk's gaze followed, paled at the sight of the smoky, starless horizon - autumn's twilight, or the dark of predawn, he didn't know. But the grey touched his soul.

"Can we stay?"

A sparkle of anger kindled the black coals of Spock's eyes. "No. We will go on."

He did not ask *where*. Speechlessly he let the Vulcan pack their few belongings, wrap him in a blanket, walk him to their mount. He stood, leaning on the saddle of the restless beast, and watched as Spock returned to blow out the candle. In the last surge of squelched light, the lines of the well-sculptured face melted into a mask he no longer knew.

Limp and drained of resistance, he allowed Spock to lift him onto the saddle. The Vulcan's step had a spring to it - the tension of a strung bow - as he jumped up behind him, one arm encircling his waist, the other already nudging the balking animal on its way. He felt a twinge of resentment.

With a resigned sigh, he leaned back against the other's ready muscles ... the winding road before him, endless, aimless. A first murky-orange ray caught his misting eyes... it was another dawn on the planet.



He bit his lips. His gift to Spock. The teeth bore into delicate flesh, clamping down hard and forbidding on the pain until he could taste the salty iron of his own blood. The smothered moan caught in his throat as he reached out for support, his hand blindly groping for the comforting solidity of the other's arm.

Spock should not know.

Weakness was with him now, a constant companion, interspersed with vivid, crushing episodes of pain. In the irony of his own upside-down world, he felt most alive at those times. The rest - the continuous journey, the gamal's tiresome gait, Spock's few, incongruously cheery remarks - passed all in a haze, peripherally felt and unreal, like the endless dirt road before him.

"It would appear, Captain, that we will reach Ran'da'Ol after sunset, at approximately 2200." Spock chose to break his own silence.

"What for...?" The bitter question, unbidden, escaped him before he could help it. "No portal exists any more, and... "

"Captain!" A painful squeeze on his shoulder stopped him. "We shall be there by nightfall." A sound - a deep-throated, bubbly giggle - emerged from the Vulcan's mouth so suddenly that it made Kirk cringe and pull away.

"I am pleased to see that you are better today," Spock said then. It was a flat statement - unfounded, unnegotiable.

With a dry throat, weary eyes, Kirk only nodded.



Slowly descending darkness found them still on the road. The sound of hoofbeats tore the cricket-sung stillness, as two shapeless forms tumbled out from the shadows, surrounding them.

"Dismount." The vague outline had a deep voice, took on a menacing form. Rough hands caught the reins of their beast and pulled them to the ground. Kirk stumbled and fell to his knees, Spock's protective presence behind him. The disembodied voice coalesced into a broad-boned, stubbled face, and a dagger pointed at Spock's throat. The second brigand was already searching their pouch, throwing its contents helter-skelter with impatient disgust.

Spock's muscles tightened, his body stretching taut and predatory, preparing to launch into attack. His voice was a growl.

"I warn you. My Captain and I will not permit this. You had best be on your way before you come to harm."

"My blade is at your throat, freak... " the other's eyes brushed Kirk's gaunt figure doubled over in the dust, "and as for your Captain..."

"My Captain," Spock interrupted furiously, "is a combat-trained Starfleet officer."

Laughter spilled out of the crude face in a cascade, cracking the hard, scarred lines until he had to hold his stomach, wipe the moisture from his eyes. "You don't say..." he started sarcastically when he could speak again, but something about the kneeling figure stopped him, the desperation in his look, the beseeching eyes.

His companion's grumbling voice broke the moment's hesitation. "A jackal would find slim pickin's in their supplies, Morav - they don't got nothin'." He circled around the gamal. "But their beast looks sturdy enough - it maybe has another season left in it." His booted foot kicked the animal, standing by the side of the road droopy-eyed and docile, glad to be relieved of its burden.

Morav eyed them for a moment, silent and calculating. Then, with a deep breath he sheathed his dagger and mounted, beckoning his henchman to follow. He sat, surveying the two faces that watched him intently.

"You're a beggardly pair if I've ever seen one. You won't last long." He laughed again, but it was a mirthless sound. "This is a rough road, traveled by rough men. Keep your beast... my gift to you."

He reined sharply and the two rode off, their forms rapidly vanishing into the dusty shadows.

Hands clenched into fists, Spock stared after them, a hard, triumphant line forming around his lips.

"Their own blind luck, ignorant louts, seems to have saved their lives."

Kirk, struggling to stand, was stopped by the strangely flat, confident voice. Astonishment widened his eyes and he straightened, watching Spock move around, hurriedly repacking their belongings.

"We've always been an unbeatable team, Captain," Spock said matter-of-factly.

Breathless, Kirk swayed, holding on to the gamal's coarse mane for support.

"Yes, Spock," he said tonelessly. "Always."



Gati-01, a few mud hovels sticking like stubborn leeches to the deserted road-fork, greeted them acceptance. It was early afternoon when in the nippy, nose-reddening cold Spock brought the gamal to a halt. He dismounted, catching Kirk's barely conscious form in his arms. For a moment he stood lost, searching, then his gaze fell on an open gate and a woman posed still as stone in its frame.

Like most of her people, she was stout with a wide, flat face, dark locks of hair, and indifferent eyes. Something about Spock prompted her to approach them.

"Your friend's ill," she made short of formalities. "Come in." Her gesture was too broad for the humble simplicity of her dwelling, but Spock gratefully followed. She pointed to a corner with a mattress fashioned out of blankets and hay - there were no real beds in the room - and Spock carefully lowered the shaking human onto it.

Dead weight. The woman's eyes took in the pitiful figure - a small, crumpled heap of skin and bones lying motionless, only the atrophied muscles trembling once in a while in a futile effort to move the emaciated body.

With a shrug she hurried out and returned with a bowl of water and some rags, pushing them into the Vulcan's reluctant hand. Then, taking over, she began to strip the helpless man.

The soaked piece of cloth dripped cold as Spock wiped Kirk's forehead, fingers lightly brushing the long, unruly hair. The command cut with its sharp sideburns was gone, the sandy curls turned into rough-textured, unkempt strands hanging loose around the skinny neck, sticking with cold sweat to the skull-like head. The bronze glow of the once golden skin had paled into a dull, coarse parchment, covered with bruises, cuts, filth. As Spock's hand proceeded to rub him down, wiping away the sweat of weakness between the protruding shoulderblades, Kirk moaned and shifted.

Pitiful, was the only thought on the woman's mind as she helped dry Kirk and then threw a blanket on him. *He's all eaten up by some disease... fading like autumn sun. Perhaps it's sartan biting into his flesh.* She pulled the blanket tighter around his heaving chest. *Nine mis-kels and a twelfth* - she was sure he couldn't weigh more - *like a stripling, a boy...*

Well, she straightened with a sigh, pressing both her knuckles to her aching lower back, *sartan is the great God's will, not for mortals to question. But perhaps the pain...*

She turned to the time-cracked shelf above the fire-stove, rummaging through its piled disorder, then returned holding a flask.

With a ragged breath Kirk's eyes opened, an unnamed plea in their hazel depths as they focused on the woman. Hesitating, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, nervous fingers cleaning the cobwebs from the bottle. A thing of value, she held it with great care as she addressed the Vulcan.

"A draught of herbs and spices - properly blended and blessed. The local healer left it with me... let's see now, more than four seasons ago," her face darkened with reminiscence, "during the great rains, when my Van-El died. It numbs the pain."

Spock pushed the flask aside with disgust. "My friend has no need of your primitive potion. He is quite well," his gaze fondly swept the human, blind to the pale, gaunt features, blue lips and sunken eyes, "though perhaps somewhat exhausted from the ride." A look of purpose hardened his features as he added, as if to himself, "We are on a forced march - have no time to waste."



The soup she made was thick and tasty, offered with the generosity of the poor. The tender care with which the slim, severe-looking stranger tried to feed his friend, so at odds with the uncompromising singlemindedness of his pursuit, puzzled her as she watched them from her corner, silent and curious.

The little food Spock forced into the protesting human came back immediately, and he lay spent and heaving as the Vulcan wiped him clean. Water, only water he wanted with insatiable thirst, and finally he fell into an uneasy sleep.

Time dragged slowly, the dusky air heavy with the smell of the low-burning wick in the lantern. Kirk woke in the witch-hour of the night with a cry of agony.

She scrambled up from her pallet, dazed and disoriented, and found the dark stranger holding the light one's hand, vacant pits in place of his eyes.

Wordlessly she reached for the medicine, held the sick man's head and made him swallow a good half-cup of it. The stranger did not interfere, and from the bed she received an embarrassingly naked glance of gratitude.

For a while, wracked by gales of pain, Kirk hung onto his companion's arm, lips white and trembling as he pressed them tightly to silence the moans erupting from within his abused body. Slowly the tremors subsided, ceased, and he lay pale and spent, bathed in the flickering light of the lamp, the glow of his own sweat.

Gathering the robe around her amply proportioned body, she sat in a rocking chair and kept vigil, the creaking sound of monotonous rocking and his uneven breathing occasionally jolting her from threshold dozing.

"Spock, I have to talk to you," his voice was small, his grip weak as he pulled Spock to sit beside him. "I can't go on." It was a statement of fact, and of acceptance. "This seems like a friendly place, poor but giving. You could work here - pull your share. You could..." then, catching his mistake, he corrected himself, "*we* could stay."

His face burned, his eyes liquid with fever.

"Captain!" Shock registered clearly on the angular Vulcan features. "Are you suggesting that we stay in... *this*," and he swept his hand around in an eloquent gesture, "this hopeless, hapless hole in the galaxy's infinity?" He was appalled, indifferent to the human's agitation, the veiled hurt in their benefactor's eyes.

Anger gave Kirk strength as he pushed himself up, his eyes gleaming. "*Don't you know we have nowhere to go?*" Fury punctuated each word.

"Jim," Spock's voice softened from shock to condescendence, as if speaking to a small, naughty child, "you are exhausted. Of course we are going - back to the Enterprise. Home. Do you not wish to see 'Bones' again? I am certain that upon seeing you he will exhibit quite an illogical array of human emotions of which he is a master." He paused, an indulgent smile warming his face. "Rest now. By morning you will assuredly feel better."

"I won't feel better..." Kirk's voice rose, then fell again wearily, defeated, "... I never will."

He lay back and curled up on his side, tears breaking down the dam of his controls, wracking his body with deepseated, heavy sobs. He mourned for a past too far to be real, a future he wouldn't see, a present he could not bear. Bones, the salty streaks raced down his face, *my friend... I'll never see you again, Bones...*

He raised one shaking arm toward the Vulcan. "I can't go on... the road... let's stay here, Spock." He saw no response on the stern, set features, and his throat constricted, the words coming in a whisper: "Spock ... *let me go...* "

She could take no more of it. By main force she pushed the tall stranger away, out of the room - *He must be mad*, she thought with a shiver - and sat by the bed, trying to calm the sobbing, senselessly mumbling other.

I can't even say it... Through the tears, the words ran in Kirk's mind in compulsive circles. *It turns Spock violent.* He remembered that time, several weeks before, when he'd first known it, felt it with certainty. The Vulcan had become enraged, had refused to listen, had almost struck him. Denying a reality he could not face, he had forbidden the word. Kirk had not uttered it since. *I know it hurts, Spock* - totally drained, he felt his conscious mind drift - ... *just let me go gentle...*



He awoke sweaty and nauseated in the woman's arms. A stranger - his last, shortlived comfort on an alien world.

Spock stood in the doorway, framed by morning sounds and light, the saddle braced on his arm. "Sunrise, Captain." He sounded perfectly normal, as if reporting from his science station at the start of a routine day. "We must not delay."

She wanted to say something, argue, protest, but Kirk stopped her with a tired hand. He let the Vulcan dress him, carry him to their beast - by now he was too weak to walk - his eyes blind mirrors of desolation as he sat silently, swaying. He was too spent to thank the woman or to bid her farewell, but he smiled at her as she stood at the gate.

It was a light-woven, bedazzling smile, transforming the gaunt planes of his collapsed cheeks. With the smile, she saw him beautiful. It made her retreat to the dusky house, to cry.



Tali-01, Derv-01, Nagen-on-the-River... from sunrise to sunset, from place to poverty-struck place of lean crops and muck and haystacked barns and strangers... And the road, winding grey and unyielding before them.

Often it stormed, the grey of the road lifting around them, seeping into the smoky skies pregnant with rainclouds, enfolding them in damp, cold arms like a tearful lover. Shivering, feverish, adrift on flimsy threads of pain, Kirk counted the stops: Peruv-01, Kever-01, Delta-Seat - then he stopped that, too. He was fading away.

Often the weight of responsibility crashed through his agony-wrought cocoon. *Spock*. What would become of Spock alone, unwanted, friendless in an alien world? He couldn't leave him.

He knew he hadn't much time left - the pain was constant and intense, muted only by periods of floating, elusive unconsciousness moving in on him like morning fog. And he was tired... *Spock*... It was not the Vulcan's fault for feeling too much, belonging, *having* - and then breaking under the impending loss. It was his own fault, for making Spock so much a part of himself. The failed mission, the closing portal trapping them on this alien hardship planet had not changed Spock - in the beginning he'd been efficient, logical... sane. Only when Kirk had experienced the first signs of illness, had grown progressively worse; only when he had finally *known*, reading the scythed signs, had Spock changed, disintegrated. Only then had something snapped within him, and he was driven by a fear compelling enough to deny reality until...

Places passed like in a dream - a nightmare - and sometimes, bone-weary, he wanted to stop, to rest, to stay. But the dreary road called Spock back with the obsession of hope, or perhaps escape. Kirk knew both to be delusive, but he never fought, never argued any more. Resigned, forgiving, he dragged his wasting body on, silent love for the Vulcan making him take to the loathed road with each new daybreak. The sand was running thin in the hourglass of his life, and he did not know what to do for the one person who still mattered.

Mal'Kir'Ol... Hader'Ol... and the long, grey, winding road...



He threw up and lay heaving in Spock's arms, choking on his own bile. For once the Vulcan halted without protest, easing Kirk's body onto the ground, trying to make him comfortable.

They were in a small clearing circled by wind-stripped trees, a bed of crushed, decaying leaves beneath them. Kirk's eyesight was failing, and the other's voice swam to him as if from a great distance. But the smell of the wet, slightly pungent leaves invaded his nostrils clearly, conjuring nameless childhood memories. He tried to recall the *Enterprise*; think of her smells and sounds, and couldn't. It made him cry in dry, shortwinded sobs, and soon he fell asleep, head nested on Spock's knees.

He woke to a strange sensation: there was no pain. His body was light and free - a cleansed, shimmering object well-felt yet external to his being. He probed it with curiosity. Then, fascinated, he drew back into his mind: clear and sharp as it had not been in weeks.

For a moment, inhaling the calm predawn air, he savored the feeling, but he knew what it meant. And the thought crystallized in his mind with sudden simplicity... the answer he'd been searching for.

"Spock," he touched the lightly dozing Vulcan, awakening him, "meld with me." His slimmed skeleton-hand placed the other's long fingers on his face, positioning them, his voice crooning as he continued. "I've missed it so - it's been so long... I want to know you, feel you in my mind." Involuntarily he shuddered at the cold thought of that insane, willful mind touching his - but there was one thing, just that one more thing to do. "Please, Spock... for old times' sake, meld with me." *A rapid, spiraling fall into the vortex, with their minds locked together would be better than the lifeless, mindless loneliness that Spock would face...* His voice, caressing velvet, droned on. "My mind to your mind... Come... "

Carefully the Vulcan removed his hand, unlaced Kirk's desperate fingers from his. "I cannot," a small smile lingered on his face, "for your sake, I cannot. We have much to do, and day is dawning."

For my sake... He could no longer see. But he felt the lifewarmth of Spock's body, the clasp of his hands against the chill, and let himself go to that. "Dawn," he said, his voice empty, and closed his eyes.



Spock held Kirk's hands for a long time, until they grew heavy, lax in his grip. He rose and turned to pack their few belongings, his steps sure and purposeful, his eyes glittering with resolve. The journey awaited them. Time to move on.

He wrapped Kirk in blankets and, carrying him in his arms, mounted the gamal. Seated high in the saddle, his eyes swept the road, grey and endless before him, then he reined the beast toward the rocky, brush-strewn No-Man's-Land.

The swaying gait lulled him - back and forth, back and forth - and he began to hum tunelessly, adding his low-pitched voice to the whistling chill of the wind.

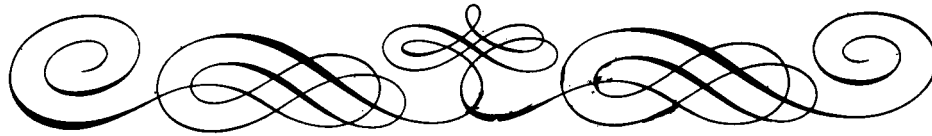
Kirk's body was heavy and cold in the supporting circle of his arms.



"Jim, how many times have we seen each other through what we both thought our last moments of life, each trusting the very essence of that life to the other's safekeeping?"

KATHY PENLAND: CONTACT 2



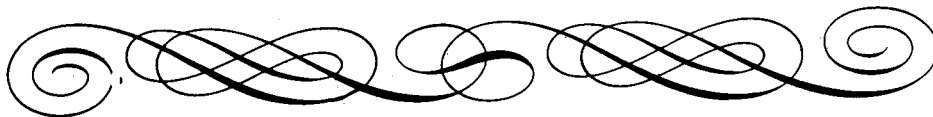


Those Who Love

Unaccustomed tears sting my eyes,
my throat constricts,
and I who in the past
always knew the proper response
in any given situation,
I... I cannot find the words
to say what is in my heart - my soul.
So I gaze silently at him,
smiling at me from across the room.
For so long, I've denied to myself
the right to feel, for once there
would have been shame to admit even
to myself that cold logic was not
enough to base a life upon.
Once T'Pau had asked, 'Art thee Vulcan,
or art thee Human?'
I thought I knew then,
but I am neither... and both... a blending.
I realize now that logic and love
are not exclusive of each other.
And so I rise, and go to him.
Placing my hand on his shoulder gently,
I look into his deep hazel eyes,
and with certainty and pride reply...
I love you too, my dearest friend.

You see, the simplest words are the best.

MARION MCCHESENEY



THE OUTSIDER



Ginna LaCroix

It began many months ago. No, not really that long ago; it just seems a lifetime to me. It happened during my last week as a cadet at the Academy. It was then that I first saw him.

He was being led down the hall in laughing protest, complaining that he was no longer an instructor at the Academy but a mighty starship captain and it was beneath his dignity to talk to cadets. He was quickly overruled and gave in, obviously pleased at being asked, despite his putting up a fuss.

They say a man instinctively knows how to recognize another man's strength - he innately realizes the power and danger that goes with it, and the inborn ability to command which only a few possess.

I felt that man's strength hit like a jolt, as though an electric charge had passed from him to me. I found myself frozen to the spot, helpless to deal with something I had heard of but never experienced before this moment.

He glanced briefly in my direction but there was no sign that my presence had registered in any way. My own state of mind was too confused to allow any acknowledgement of that look.

"You're late for lecture, Mister!" The heavy hand of my class supervisor landed on my shoulder causing me to jump. Flaming red, I glanced in the Captain's direction and saw amused sympathy shining out of his eyes.

"Come on, Alex, give the poor kid a break." The voice matched the eyes, the smile almost instantly breaking the command image, making him seem like a co-conspirator in my trouble.

"The service requires discipline, Jim," were the words that rang in my ears as I was marched off down the hall.

I saw him later that day with several hundred others. Every word he said is still clear in my mind. I knew he had nothing prepared, and he had no notes in front of him. He held us all spellbound as he talked about life in Starfleet, the responsibilities of representing the Federation throughout the galaxy.

It was over far too quickly, and he was gone. James T. Kirk had touched my life for a brief moment and had left an impact that I had never felt before.

And I admit I was disturbed. I was not the type of person to fall under the spell of everyone I met. I had never had crushes, no special teachers; if anything, I turned cynically in the other direction. Yet for weeks I could not get this man out of my mind. I found myself asking anyone who might know anything about him for any sort of information - what he was like, his background, his current assignment, anything! It got to the point where my roommate began to wonder about me, so I stopped. But my interest in the man did not fade.

I saw James Kirk once shortly after graduation. We were on a training mission and had stopped for a few days at Starbase 11. My friend Derek and I were on shore leave. We were wandering around the base when I saw him coming out of the hospital complex. He looked strained and tired. He stopped, seeming at a loss as to where to go, but then the doors behind him opened and a Vulcan stepped through. We had come quite close by then and easily overheard their exchange.

"McCoy says he's out of danger, Spock. I'm contacting the Terran Embassy; Sam's son should be brought up at home."

I watched those dark alien eyes look at Kirk and felt a momentary flash of anger at the unfeeling features. Kirk had obviously been through a lot and looked like he deserved some sympathetic attention. Who was this Vulcan?

I was aware of Derek at my elbow. "Hey, what's the matter with you? Come on, we're going to be late for the beam-up and Rogers will be on our backs again!" I had not realized that I had stopped and was staring at the two men. Nor was Kirk aware of it - he seemed lost in some private grief. But the Vulcan knew. His eyes had shifted from Kirk to me and I knew that I had somehow been registered into that brain, that my image would never be forgotten. I felt threatened by the thought.

My training days ended. I was now a full-fledged ensign ready to start at the bottom of the heap. Unlike many of my classmates, I was immediately assigned to a starship and I dreaded the assignment. The ship was the USS Enterprise. Her Captain was James Kirk and his First Officer was the Vulcan, Spock.

It had been some time since my encounter with the Captain and Mr. Spock on Starbase 11, but the sight of the Vulcan's unfathomable expression as I watched Kirk was seared into my memory. I felt that the alien knew about the powerful hold that Kirk had on me, and I was uncomfortable with the



idea that somehow he understood why - and I didn't.

I was determined to be good at my work. If I was going to be on board Kirk's ship he was never going to have any reason to question my ability. I was assigned as an assistant in medical services and my superior was a Dr. Leonard McCoy. From our first meeting I liked him. He was gruff but friendly enough and seemed to be the most unmilitary military man I had ever met. He was also a stern taskmaster and I quickly learned to be on my toes. But he always seemed pleased with my work and, sneaking a peek at my records, I discovered that he had put in a recommendation for an early promotion.

For several months life went on with no complications. Then Rigellian fever struck the ship and we did not have nearly enough antitoxin to combat it.

I had been on my feet for two days trying to prepare a synthetic substitute for ryetalyn when McCoy came into the lab accompanied by the Vulcan. I tried very hard to be inconspicuous.

But the body grows careless when denied sleep, and the culture I was working on dropped from my hand with a loud clatter. As I bent to retrieve it, I dislodged a large jar which spattered its contents all over the floor. I was inconspicuous no longer.

The Vulcan's eyes were on me - I saw a momentary look of recollection, then the dark depths were fathomless. McCoy, looking almost as tired as I felt, simply told me to clean up the mess and then get to bed. There was no use trying to work in my condition.

I slept the sleep of the dead. Several days later the epidemic had been halted and we were on our way to our next assignment.

Making my way to the lab I passed McCoy. He did not appear to notice me and was muttering something that sounded like, "damned Vulcan." I stared after him but he didn't slow down and soon disappeared around a bend in the corridor.

I decided to take a short cut down the ladder, so got off the turbolift at Deck 5. As I passed the Captain's quarters the door opened and the Vulcan came out. I caught a glimpse of a gold-clad figure collapsed at the desk. Then the door slid shut and I was face to face with a cold glare. I had seen something I was not meant to see. I met Spock's look and found myself hating him. I felt that whatever had happened must have been his fault, otherwise why would McCoy have been damning him, and why was Kirk in the condition he was? For all his strength, Kirk carried an air of vulnerability that cried out for someone who understood, and that was something that Spock could never give him. But I could, I knew I could, given the chance, I dared the Vulcan then. I met his stare head on and I know that he saw my threat.

You have no claim on him, Vulcan! my mind screamed. Your race denies emotion. You couldn't possibly understand him, know his feelings, his needs.

They said that Spock possessed telepathic powers. He may not have been able to read my mind that day, but I am sure my expression conveyed my

thoughts. A funny look flickered across his face but was gone before I had a chance to wonder what it meant. Then he, too, was gone.

From that moment on I decided to become indispensable, my youth not permitting me to realize that no one can attain that impossible height. Previously I had avoided landing parties, shying away from any contact with Kirk unless it could not be helped. I was honestly scared by my feelings. Each time I was in his presence I felt as though I was drawn by a magnet. I also saw that it was not noticed,

Kirk was indeed an extraordinary man. There were 430 people aboard his ship and he could call each person by name. Most of them could also be labeled by occupation and what section of the ship they worked in. He had the ability to make everyone under his command feel special. He did not minimize the importance of anyone's contribution, no matter how large or small. I also discovered that he put no man ahead of any other - except for the Vulcan.

Spock was special to him and he stated it by not being obvious about it. But as I grew more familiar with him, as our increased contact on landing parties and briefings made me more aware of the man and his habits, I learned to recognize the signs - the looks, the gestures, each question, each decision arrived at after an almost hidden exchange with the Vulcan. And I burned, Spock had something I wanted badly. It made me try all the harder,

I thought my motive was unnoticed, my feelings well-controlled. I had not reckoned with the keen observation of my superior.

I was working late, finishing the reports on the materials we had gathered on Galundia. The biological surveys had shown promising reports of a potentially new supply of Yagun, a vital drug in the treatment of Bisyndencephalitis, an increasingly common disease of the central nervous system and deadly if not treated in time. I vaguely heard the lab doors open but didn't pay any attention. The resulting silence finally caused me to look up.

McCoy was leaning against a lab table, his keen blue eyes boring into me. As I lifted my head his expression changed, but I knew that he didn't like what he saw.

"Y'all are puttin' in a heap of overtime, Ensign," he drawled in a voice I had already learned meant he was covering up strong emotions under the calm exterior. "Maybe you should consider private enterprise - a man can get pretty rich that way."

I mumbled something vague and bent back over my work.

He was silent, but I was uncomfortably aware of his presence. Finally I could stand it no longer. "Do you have something to say, Doctor?" My voice sounded angry even to my ears. "If not, I have work to do... sir!"

He looked a bit surprised, then shifted his weight onto his feet and walked over to where I was working.

"Yes, I do want to say something," His eyes were hard and I instantly knew what he was going to say. "Your animosity toward Spock is starting to interfere with the harmony and efficiency of the research personnel assigned to landing parties. You haven't said a civil word to him in two weeks..."

I could feel my face redden but I knew better than to interrupt.

"I don't know what's going on between the two of you but it can't continue. You're one of the best men I've ever had working under me and I don't want to lose you, but this attitude's got to stop..."

"Has Spock complained about me?" I interrupted, "Has he complained about me or about my work? Has the Capt... Captain..." I stumbled over the word and saw his eyes change as a new thought seemed to enter his mind. I grew more ill at ease under his scrutiny. He was starting to put two and two together and I could see he wasn't happy with what they were adding up to. The silence began to stretch out into an uncomfortable length. Finally he spoke.

"You're treading on dangerous ground, Ensign, and in a place you don't and can't ever belong. Try to understand the world those two men inhabit, then take a look at yourself. Do it for your own sake!"

Then he was gone and I was left staring at a closed door.

After that I was more aware of both Spock and McCoy. Every action I made seemed to underline my growing obsession with Kirk. But if he was aware of it he gave no sign. I tried to be civil to Spock and must have succeeded for McCoy did not speak to me about it again.

And to my pleasure, Kirk seemed to be starting to rely on my presence. He began to turn to me for information as we carried out our assignments, and occasionally I would look over in triumph at the Vulcan but I never got the satisfaction of seeing him anything but expressionless.

I thought it might go on like this forever, but a showdown was inevitable. And it came sooner than I expected.

Jancinta was a small planet in a far corner of the quadrant we were patrolling. We were heading there to complete the data started by previous survey expeditions, and to see what progress had been made in the development of the Jancintan culture and civilization. A small party beamed down in native costume - the Captain, Mr. Spock, anthropologist Marstan, and me. Our destination was a small village a short distance from our beamdown point.

We were welcomed by the villagers and made to feel at home. I found myself admitting to a grudging respect for Spock; Kirk was a perfect diplomat and Spock the perfect foil, probing where it would be impossible for Kirk to try. If any toes were stepped on it would be done by him, leaving Kirk free of stain.

When we turned in for the night, I could tell that Kirk was pleased with what we had found. We would do some more exploring the next day, then beam

back up to the ship. Sleep came quickly to all of us except Spock, who, as usual, sat meditating. For all I knew he never slept.

We had been asleep for a couple of hours when a sudden alarm from Spock had us on our feet. Raiders from a neighboring village had planned their attack well, and we would have died where we slept if Spock had not been awake.

We were vastly outnumbered. Marstan was killed almost immediately. The Captain was managing to hold his own. I disposed of my nearest assailant and saw Spock slowly staggering forward under the weight of his attackers. I started for him, foolishly letting my attention stray for a moment to Kirk, and only too late saw the flash of the blade. I moved as quickly as I could but too late to entirely miss the knife's thrust. I fell to the floor, unable to move.

Kirk saw Spock's helplessness almost at the same moment I did. With a tremendous effort he freed himself from his attackers and hurled himself into the middle of the large group holding Spock. I watched, helpless, as they were both beaten senseless. Then darkness claimed me.

"What will they do to our friend?" The face and voice showed no expression, the dark eyes masking any show of feeling.

"It is best not to ask such things," said the village leader. "You will not see him again."

I held my peace as Spock helped me back to the hut, but when he started to contact the ship, I exploded. "What about the Captain, Mr. Spock? He's in trouble - he could already be dead! Are we just going to leave him? Is that all he means to you?"

His eyes met mine over the communicator. "My feelings are not open for discussion, Ensign. Your duty is to obey orders, nothing more." I stood fuming while he talked to Mr. Scott, then I found myself on the ship's transporter platform - alone. McCoy was there with a medical team. He took one look at me.

"Sickbay, Mister. Right now!"

"But the Captain..."

"Now!"

The voice was to be obeyed, and I did.

So I was there when Kirk was brought in. Spock was with him. No one paid any attention to me lying in the corner. They were both bloody, and from where I was I could not tell how badly Kirk was hurt. They disappeared into another room and the silence echoed around my small corner. Eventually Christine Chapel came out,

"How's...?"

"He'll be all right," she said, a smile of relief on her face, "but it will take a while. Apparently he was being used as a sacrifice to appease their gods. Fortunately Mr. Spock arrived before they got very far..." She broke off as McCoy came through the doorway and moved over to me.

"I see Christine is giving out the gory details," he said with a smile. "How are you feeling?" he continued, switching the panel over my bed. He frowned slightly as he watched the arrows settle, then smiled again as he looked down at me. "Nothing a little more blood won't fix up." He turned to Christine and ordered another unit of whole blood. He watched her move away, then turned back to me. "You all right?"

I knew he didn't mean my wound, and I didn't know how to answer.

He looked at me a moment longer, then said in quiet anger, "Don't you ever give up?" and walked away before I had a chance to answer.

I was out of Sickbay before Kirk. While I was there my jealousy of Spock grew as I saw how much time he spent with Kirk, and how much his presence meant to the Captain. McCoy was aware of my feeling but left me to argue with myself. He released me after a few days with a final word of warning.

So life went on as before - I watched Kirk and avoided Spock where I could. McCoy watched me but I gave him no further cause for concern.

The weeks passed. Kirk recovered and took command back from the Vulcan. He commended me for my actions on Jancinta and I flushed, partly out of embarrassment and pride, partly from shame, since Spock had obviously not told him of my behavior after Kirk's capture. I wondered at this, but Spock gave no hint as to why he had omitted it.

This made me curious and I started to watch Kirk and Spock more closely in those quiet times they spent together. Not as I had before when I was trying to plot ways of getting myself between them, but to see what it was that McCoy meant when he said there was no room for me there.

The days passed and I watched, not really understanding what it was I was looking for. What was beginning to register was that although I deliberately tried to be rude to the Vulcan, there was no retaliation from Spock. No matter how great the snub I managed to impart he did not answer it, nor was my behavior reported. Occasionally I would see a brief look almost akin to sorrow in the dark eyes, then nothing. What was it that the Vulcan knew about me that I didn't know myself? I started to do some serious thinking.

We were charting new areas of space and the dangers of the unexplored regions were many. The scientific teams were spread out all over the ship doing experimental work necessary to analyze the sensor readings that were being fed into the computers.

I was working in one of the pods. Spock was assisting the experiment at his own request and, although I disliked him, I found him to be remarkably efficient. He always seemed to anticipate my next move.

What happened will always remain hazy in my mind. I remember the shrieking alarm of red alert and the words, "ion storm." I heard the Captain's voice, calm but urgent, come over the intercom. Then the world exploded. I felt strong arms surround me and my body hurled into waiting hands. I must have blacked out for a few minutes because I woke to find myself lying on my back with M'Benga hovering over me. Then someone was gently laid down beside me and I heard McCoy's voice.

"M'Benga, over here!" I knew it was Spock who was lying there so deathly still. I pushed myself up on one elbow and was immediately conscious of two things - the driven flow of green blood running from the Vulcan's temple, and the anguished look on Kirk's face as he knelt over him. I will never forget that look. It mirrored the brief glimpses of sorrow I had seen in Spock's eyes. I think that was the first time I really let myself begin to understand what they must share. I was being lifted onto a stretcher. Kirk stood up and came over.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I nodded. "Thanks to Spock, or I would be dead for sure. He didn't have to stay. He could have made it out - he was outside the pod..." As I spoke his eyes grew bright and he nodded.

"That's Spock," he said simply. "It always has been."

I had the entire night to think about those words. Spock was in surgery for a long time. McCoy assisted M'Benga and the Captain paced in and out. I lay silent, unnoticed, as the larger drama unfolded. Etched forever in my mind is the image of Kirk as McCoy told him that Spock would live. The tense muscles gave and he sank down into a chair, his head bowed. McCoy's hand on Kirk's shoulder told me all I needed to know about his understanding of that unique friendship. I now understood his warning. He had not meant to hurt me, he had meant to protect me from hurt. Despite the possible grief that always hung like a dark shadow over those two men, they dared to open themselves to the dangers that came with such a friendship.

I transferred from the Enterprise shortly after that. I had finally begun to grow up. I went with a good record, high recommendations, and total silence from the one man who could have destroyed it all by reporting my insubordinate behavior.

And I left as much an outsider as I had been when I arrived. But I had seen something that few men are ever privileged to witness, and I was now free to seek it for myself.





A Matter Of Perspective



Beverly J. Volker

The shivering figure sat huddled on one side of the bed, a blanket wrapped around him Indian style, his legs hanging over the bunk's edge. He was a picture of misery. Across the room, the Vulcan pattered at the stove with a tea pot and mug, occasionally glancing surreptitiously toward the other man. He filled the mug and approached his friend.

"Jim, if you do not feel well enough to get up, why don't you lie back down and get under the blanket." Spock held out the mug of tea. "But drink this first."

Kirk did not take the proffered cup. "Some shore leave this has turned out to be. Two days planetside and I come down with a bug. Six days I've wasted on this bunk in this god-forsaken hut! Six days! What a hell of a time to be sick." Kirk began to cough, a deep, chesty bark that caused him to heave, which would drain his strength and ultimately leave him exhausted.

Patiently Spock placed the mug on the bedside table and sat next to his Captain, supporting his shoulders until the spasm passed. As Kirk calmed, Spock felt the exhausted Human lean against him, breathing heavily. The Vulcan kept one arm around his friend and with his free hand he reached, once more, for the mug of tea.

"Here, Jim, take a sip of this. It will help." He held the cup to Kirk's lips. "Careful - it's hot."

"Nothing seems to help," Kirk rasped, reaching up to steady the mug and take a sip. He swallowed the warm liquid, choking a little. "What kind of witch-doctor medicine-man is this physician who's supposed to be treating me, anyway? I've taken all his vile potions and shots, and I can't say I've felt any improvement."

"He is an excellent, highly-qualified doctor," Spock assured. "Remember, we checked his credentials through Starfleet files before he examined you. But he did say this was an unknown strain of bacteria, something compound, they believe, and they do not have the exact antibiotic to kill it."

"No, they'll end up killing me, first," Kirk said sourly.

"Jim, this virus is rarely fatal. In fact, the percentage is two thousand, three hundred.... "

Kirk groaned. "Spock, please... " He moved to sit up. A tiny smile formed at the corner of the Vulcan's mouth.

"Nevertheless," Spock stood and replaced the mug on the table, "while you may be rather uncomfortable, there is little chance of your dying from this illness. You are otherwise in excellent physical condition, and as long as you follow the physician's instructions - plenty of rest, take the medicine - you should recover with no ill effects."

"I'm glad you're so confident about that." Kirk made no effort to conceal his sarcasm. He lay on the bed, pulling his knees up, trying to ignore the cramps in his stomach and the rolling nausea that continued to wage its battle with his determination not to succumb to its demands. He squeezed his eyes shut and felt Spock pull the blanket up around him. "Must be damn comforting to you to know that Vulcans are immune to this particular virus!" The moment he said it he was sorry. He opened his eyes and looked up into the concerned face. This was Spock's leave too, and it certainly couldn't be much fun for him to be stuck taking care of a sick Captain the whole time.

"Jim, I wish there was something I could do to make... "

Kirk shook his head. "Forget it, Spock. I didn't mean that last crack," He began to shiver. "Damn. If the Enterprise were here, I'd beam back aboard and let McCoy confine me to quarters until this passes. At least I wouldn't be using up leave time, and you could take off and salvage what's left of your time."

Spock pulled up a chair and sat next to the bed. "We planned this vacation together. I do not find the idea of a solitary camping trip very appealing."

Kirk smiled a little at his friend's admission. "No, I guess not."

"The important thing," Spock began, "is for you to get well. If you follow the doctor's orders and do not overtax yourself, there should be no complications."

"Okay," Kirk agreed. "I'll be good, but I feel so damned lousy, and this is such a waste of valuable time."

Spock stood and placed a hand on Kirk's forehead. It was too hot. The Vulcan sighed. "Try to sleep a while, Jim." Kirk shut his eyes in reply. His breathing wheezed and Spock knew from the quivering of the blanket that he was still having chills.

Kirk slept for two hours. During that time Spock fixed something to eat, then took his meal and some journal tapes he had brought along outside the hut, where he would be near enough to hear if Jim woke up, yet far enough removed so as not to inadvertently disturb his sleep. The sun was shining brightly, the temperature was balmy - all in all, a beautiful day. Just as they had hoped it would be... almost.

They had been planning this vacation for a long time: a camping trip away from the Enterprise, on one of the nicest Starbase planets in the sector. It was not to be too rustic or too primitive. They had secured a well-equipped plexiglass dome in which they would set up housekeeping, and selected a wooded area several kilometers from the nearest city, with a lake for swimming and fishing. Kirk had been delighted and full of enthusiasm when, after a number of unforeseeable delays, they were at last able to leave the ship for three wonderfully relaxing weeks, with the knowledge that they would not be called back for any reason short of a galactic crisis.

The first two days had gone exactly as they had envisioned, then in the middle of the second night, Kirk had awakened with chills and fever. His throat was sore and his stomach had cramped with nausea and vomiting. By morning his whole body ached and he had developed a rasping cough. Spock had bundled him into their rented surface car and they had driven to the MedicoCentral in town.

Doctor Atando, a staff Starfleet physician, had examined Kirk and pronounced his illness to be caused by an unknown viral strain, probably airborne. The symptoms could be treated, but the cure was pretty much up to nature itself. Since the virus was not fatal in otherwise healthy humans, nor contagious to Vulcans, Dr. Atando had not seen the necessity for hospitalization. With medicine and proper care, Kirk would recover normally in a relatively short time. However, Kirk and Spock only had a relatively short time for vacationing.

In six days Kirk did not seem to have improved. If anything, his cough seemed worse, but several calls and another visit to MedicoCentral had simply netted them the assurance that the illness must run its course, that Kirk was in no immediate danger, and that no more could be done than what was being done. With each passing day of misery, Kirk's impatience grew. He was not a placid patient.

Spock sympathized with his friend. It was not important to him that their vacation was not turning out as they had planned. His concern, as always, was for Kirk's health. Doctor Atando had an excellent record and Spock had no reason to doubt the physician's abilities, yet he found himself more than once regretting that it was not McCoy who was treating Kirk. Somehow Spock illogically realized that he really believed that the Enterprise's Chief Surgeon did indeed retain a bag full of miracle cures. But McCoy was not with them. He was still on board the Enterprise, far removed from them on a routine patrol in another part of the sector, and the situation was not serious enough to put in an emergency call to divert a starship for her ailing Captain. Nevertheless, Spock wished that he and Kirk had been more insistent that the doctor come along, that they had been less agreeable to the arguments that the two of them seldom had a chance to simply enjoy each other's company.

Spock was startled out of his reverie by a loud thud from within the hut. Quickly gaining his feet, the Vulcan charged through the door to find Kirk

half-standing, half-leaning against the side of the bed, clutching it for support. The chair that had been next to it was overturned. Spock crossed the room and eased his Captain back to a sitting position on the side of the bed.

"What happened?"

"I... woke up." Kirk seemed a little dazed. "Was thirsty... wanted to get a drink of water. When I stood up, the room started spinning. Guess I lost my balance, knocked over the chair."

Spock let go of Kirk and righted the chair. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Didn't know where you'd gone... "

"You're running a fever. It's made you light-headed. You should not try to get up."

"That's... that's not all, Spock. My stomach... uugghh... " Kirk started to heave and Spock grabbed quickly for a receptacle standing next to the bedside table. With one hand he held it for Kirk, placing his other hand on the back of his friend's neck. But Kirk only shook with violent, dry heaves, his stomach having, several days before, lost the ability to receive any solid food. When the tremors subsided, Kirk lay back against the bed and Spock brought him a towel and some crushed ice to soothe his flaming throat.

"Damn," Kirk swore, relaxing a little. "I feel like I've been trampled by a herd of wild Brindleboars."

Spock considered. "Hmnm, a picturesque description, Captain, if somewhat incorrect. You exhibit none of the outward manifestations of such an encounter."

"How would you know?"

"I see no evidence of bruises, lacerations, broken bones... "

Kirk grimaced. "Spock, shut up." He closed his eyes, then peeked at the Vulcan. "I said I *feel* like it."

Spock's eyes twinkled mischievously and he let his hand rest on Kirk's shoulder. "I do not mean to minimize your discomfort, Jim. Can I get you something?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, sit down. What were you doing outside?"

"Reading."

"What's the weather like?"

Spock took a seat in the chair, "It is a beautiful day."

Kirk groaned. "Never mind - I don't want to know."

"You brought some tapes with you," Spock suggested. "Would you like to read for a while?"

"No, my eyes hurt too much to try it."

"Then perhaps I could read something to you."

Kirk brightened. "Yeah, that might be fun, but... are you sure you wouldn't rather go outside, take a walk, observe this beautiful day or something?"

Spock shook his head. "I assure you, I have no desire to walk... alone."

Kirk grinned. "Have you ever read *Robinson Crusoe*, Mr. Spock?"

Spock was thoughtful. "Although I have heard of the book, it is not one that I have ever taken the opportunity to read."

"It was one of my earliest favorites," Kirk confided. "Get the porta-viewer. We'll explore Mr. Crusoe's desert isle right now."

For the next several hours, Spock read aloud from the visual tape, becoming so engrossed in the old Earth tale that he barely noticed that Kirk occasionally drifted off to sleep, lulled by the soothing sounds of his quiet, resonant voice. Eventually his concentration was interrupted and he slowly became aware of muffled sounds coming from the bed. Drawing his eyes from the viewer to Kirk, Spock saw that his friend was bathed in sweat. Kirk had pulled his legs up so that he was lying doubled over on his side, his face contorted into a tight mask of pain.

Acutely concerned, Spock moved the viewer aside and leaned over the bed. "Jim, what is it?"

"Damn, damn..." Kirk gritted through clenched teeth. "Cramps... in my... stomach." He coughed.

"Very bad?" Spock's voice broadcasted the alarm he was beginning to feel. Kirk caught the worried tone. He tried to nod, tried to relax, and failed.

"Not... not good," he admitted.

Spock checked the time and saw that he could give Kirk another shot of the medicine Dr. Atando had prescribed for pain. "I'll get you something," he promised.

Rising from the chair, Spock crossed the room to prepare the hypo-spray. At once he was aware that daylight had begun to fade. It was early evening and Spock dreaded the long, restless night, when Kirk would seem to be much worse. He brought the hypo back and pressed it against Kirk's arm. "This should help," Spock's voice was edged with fear and he felt his own stomach knot in empathy with the sick man. Kirk opened his eyes and managed to smile.

"Hey... don't look so grim. I'm... I'm not going to die from this, remember?" Spock could not answer. Kirk nodded toward the viewer. "C'mon, let's... let's finish the story."

"Jim..." Spock was dubious. "I'm not certain that we should continue..."

Kirk reached out and took Spock's arm. "I'll be all right. The medicine's starting to work already."

Reluctantly Spock repositioned the viewer just as the pre-set illumination came on in the hut. With less enthusiasm than before, Spock resumed his narration. Keeping one worried eye on the slowly relaxing Human, Spock once more visited the desert island of Robinson Crusoe and his faithful man, Friday.



The days passed too slowly - and too quickly. At times Kirk seemed to be getting better. He would manage to eat, his temperature would be back to normal, his throat would not be sore, and he would venture outside - only to be caught up short by a coughing bout, a wave of vertigo, a general feeling of weakness. At the end of the second week, Doctor Atando called him in to MedicoCentral for some extra tests. Spock was relieved to learn that he had invited a consultant in to examine Kirk. The physicians were not pleased by the Captain's lack of recovery, but neither were they overly concerned. When the tests and examinations failed to reveal anything unusual, Atando met with the two men in his office. He explained once more about the elusive viral infection and maintained that Kirk was the victim of an unusually stubborn strain, that patience and proper care would eventually net a cure.

Morosely Kirk and Spock returned to their campsite resigned to 'waiting out' the illness. Spock was more concerned over his friend's mental attitude than the actual virus which, while uncomfortable, was not that serious. Kirk was not used to a prolonged sickness that seemed to drain the spirit from him, and Spock determined that he must try to do something to cheer the Captain.

This, however, would be no easy task, since Kirk's disposition seemed to deteriorate faster than his body. Spock helped him get settled into bed, then sat in the chair at his side,

"Do you feel up to a game of chess, Jim?"

Kirk shook his head. "I don't think so, Spock."

"Then perhaps if I read to you..."

"Uh, not now." Kirk shut his eyes.

"Very well. Would you like something to drink?"

Kirk opened his eyes. "Spock, uh... don't feel you have to entertain me. Really, I think I'd rather just nap for a while."

Spock nodded. "Rest *is* the best thing for you."

Kirk tried to doze. Several times he started to drift off to sleep, only to be brought awake by a feeling of unease. Finally he forced his eyes open. The Vulcan was still in the chair by his bed.

"Spock," Kirk grumbled, "are you going to sit there and watch me while I sleep?"

The Vulcan looked flustered, "I... no," he stammered. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you." He rose and crossed the room. Kirk closed his eyes once more, trying to sleep. The feeling of unease still persisted. Now he was sure he had hurt the Vulcan's feelings. He opened his eyes and peered across the room. Spock was selecting a tape for viewing. Kirk called his name and he turned.

"Yes, Jim?"

"C'mon over here. Your presence doesn't disturb me."

A Vulcan eyebrow lifted slightly, but Spock did not reply. He crossed to the bed, the tape still in his hand. "No, Jim, you were right. You should sleep now and I shall do some reading."

Kirk knew he was not going to be able to sleep. His head ached and his body was tired yet restless. He rolled over to his side. "What are you going to read?"

The corners of Spock's mouth curled into a slight smile. "Masterson's Theory of Applied Physics as it Pertains to the Rain Forests of Theta II."

Kirk groaned. "Spock, this is supposed to be a vacation. If you're not going to be able to relax in the way we had intended, the least you could do is keep your reading light and entertaining."

"Jim, this tape is most interesting..." Spock protested.

"I'm not talking about interesting. I'm talking about fun, enjoyment. Like, *Robinson Crusoe*. You enjoyed reading that, didn't you?"

Spock nodded.

"How come you only do things you enjoy when *I* make you, when *I* suggest them, when *I* am doing them with you..." Kirk stopped talking, suddenly aware of his words, aware of the satisfied look on his friend's face. "Oh... I, uh... see what you mean..." He smiled, the joy of Spock being there spreading a warmth that eased the aching muscles, soothed his throbbing brain. He grinned up at Spock. "Before you sit down, see if you can't come up with something more exciting to read. Why don't we try *Treasure Island*? You'll like that one."

As Spock crossed to the tape file, Kirk stretched out on the bed, easing tension, willing himself to relax. Listening to Spock's soothing voice, Kirk knew he would indeed soon fall asleep...

As Spock replaced his scientific tape with *Treasure Island*, he allowed a sense of satisfaction to creep in. His ploy had worked. Jim was relaxed, less annoyed. He would be able to sleep and get well. Sometimes the Human was so easy to manipulate. Spock returned to the bed with the tape, eager to begin reading the old Terran book with his friend.



There were two days left of their leave when Kirk was finally well enough to participate in some outdoor activities. He was awake before Spock, up and

puttering around the kitchen area. He felt a little lightheaded; there was some residual weakness in his legs, but the nausea was gone, the hacking cough had all but disappeared, no more throbbing headache... Kirk crossed to Spock's bunk,

"Hey, sleepyhead, we have to be back on the ship in two days. The weather is perfect. Let's get out and do something."

Spock rolled over and opened one eye, peering warily up at Kirk. "I take it you are feeling well this morning."

Kirk grinned. "Yes, fine. C'mon, get moving. We're wasting time."

The Vulcan propped himself up on his elbows and opened both eyes fully. Kirk held out a glass.

"Here, have some juice. I'll finish breakfast while you're dressing." It seemed Spock would have no choice.

Kirk was impatient to salvage what was left of their vacation. Now that he was feeling better, he would try to cram two and a half weeks of lost activities into two days. He had planned some fishing and swimming in the lake, a hike in the woods, and Spock knew that if his enthusiasm were not hampered, he would vacation himself right back into a relapse.

Spock considered the problem as he dressed in a casual knit shirt and slacks. Kirk had already pulled on a lightweight tunic, leaving the laces undone at the neck. The day was sunny and warm, so at least the weather had held good for them.

After breakfast, they started off toward the woods, Kirk insisting that he hadn't had a chance to really look at the place before he had become ill. Spock let the Human set the pace and followed as Kirk moved out briskly, beginning their walk.

They had been walking about an hour, their speed gradually decreasing, when Kirk stopped short and sank down on a fallen log. He was perspiring, breathing heavily.

"Let's... take a break." He was beginning to wheeze. Spock dropped down beside him, obviously unaffected by the steady walking. Kirk was fatigued but Spock was loathe to mention it. A look of annoyance crossed Kirk's face as he began to relax. "Damn, guess I'm not as fit as I thought I was. A little hike like this shouldn't be so tiring."



"Jim," Spock began uncertainly, "you are just recovering from a very severe illness. You do not have your full strength back yet."

"Yeah, I know. Shouldn't try to overdo it. But hell, we only have two days left."

Spock suddenly looked away, not bothering to hide a brooding, angry expression. The act was not lost on Kirk, and he gazed curiously at his friend.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Spock turned back to face the confused hazel eyes and the hard expression softened a little. "Jim, why must you be so discontented? Why must you drive yourself so?"

"Just what is that supposed to mean?" It was Kirk's turn to be angry. The Vulcan had a penchant for avoiding issues he did not wish to discuss. Spock drew a deep breath, regretting he had ever started this.

"I simply meant that if you allowed yourself, you might find some merit in peaceful, quiet pursuits."

Kirk dismissed the answer. "Spock, I've had nothing but rest and quiet since we arrived here."

"And I know it has not been enjoyable."

"Well," Kirk considered, "I haven't enjoyed being sick."

"I didn't mean that you did."

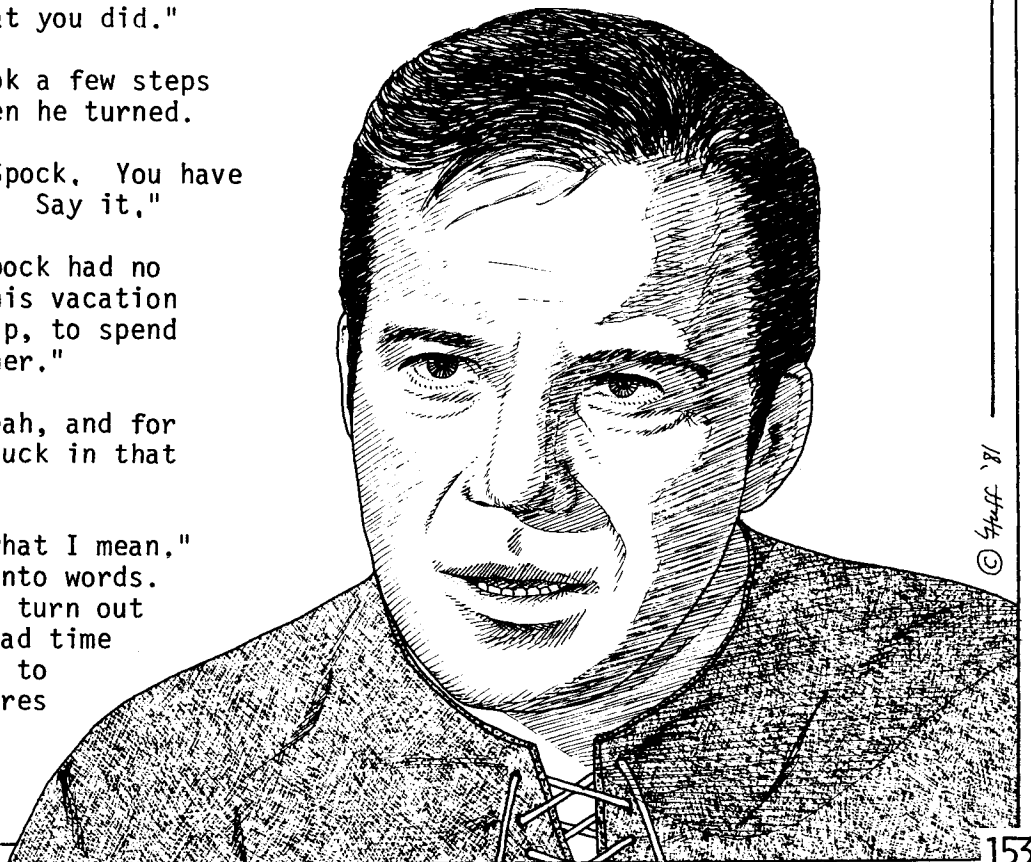
Kirk stood and took a few steps away from the log. Then he turned.

"You're hedging, Spock. You have something on your mind. Say it."

Faced this way, Spock had no choice. "We came on this vacation to be away from the ship, to spend time relaxing... together."

Kirk frowned. "Yeah, and for two weeks we've been stuck in that hut... "

"That is exactly what I mean," Spock tried to put it into words. "Even though it did not turn out as we had planned, we had time to... to talk and read, to be away from the pressures of the ship."



18. JH45 ©

"Grand." Kirk wasn't convinced. "I could have been sick in my quarters, and McCoy would have made sure I didn't feel the pressures of the ship."

Spock shook his head. "That's not true, Captain. As long as you are on that ship, you insist upon being informed about everything that's happening. And even if you had managed to escape your obligations for a time, I would have still been on duty. Still had to divide my time between the ship and... and other pursuits."

Kirk realized the Vulcan was still trying to be evasive. "Are you trying to say that you've enjoyed this shore leave?"

Spock chose his words. "I... did not enjoy the fact that you were sick, Jim, and believe me, I'm not trying to minimize the seriousness of the illness. I know it was unpleasant and uncomfortable for you and I wish... wish it would have been me that picked up the germ instead of you. Then you would have been able to pursue your activities... "

Kirk's expression softened. "Hey, don't be ridiculous. I didn't want *either* of us to be sick. And what makes you think that I would have gone off any more than you did, if the situation had been reversed? If I had wanted to do all those things alone, I wouldn't have asked you to come along."

The ghost of a smile formed at Spock's mouth. "Don't you see, Jim? This is exactly what I'm trying to say." He sobered. "I... find it difficult to express what I... I think. I believe it is not so important what we do, but that we do it together. So often on shore leaves, we are so engaged in 'having a good time', indulging in activities which we believe bring us pleasure, we are so busy getting everything into a short period of time that we may be distracted from the true purpose of a leave."

Kirk grinned. "You don't believe we should whoop it up on a shore leave?"

Spock shrugged. "If that is what you wish."

Kirk sat down next to Spock. "Ah, my serious Vulcan. I'm just teasing. I understand what you're saying and I see your point. I guess there's time for all that 'letting off steam' on shore leaves, too, and for us Humans, at least, sometimes it is necessary. But there are times when this is nice also, I guess, now that you mention it, it wasn't all bad. Feeling like hell aside, we did get a chance to really be together, without distractions, so to speak. And I did enjoy that aspect of it. I'm afraid, though, that I wasn't very good company... "

"That's not true." The protest was immediate.

"Spock... " Kirk drew back, challenging.

A twinkle lit the Vulcan's eyes. "Well, perhaps I *have* seen you in more agreeable spirits... "

"Okay." Kirk stood abruptly. "Then let's make up for lost time. Come on... "

A look of disappointment crossed Spock's face. His voice was resigned. "Swimming or hiking?"

"Reading," Kirk informed. "Only this time we'll take turns on the chapters. And maybe later we'll have a quiet, uninterrupted game of chess. Then we'll take a leisurely stroll to the edge of the lake and watch the sunset." He made a mock grimace. "A real restful, non-stimulating shore leave."

Spock rose, the austere Vulcan features somewhat incongruous with the beaming Human expression forced upon them.



McCoy laid down his mediscanner and grinned in satisfaction at his patient. "You're sound as ever and absolutely fit for duty, Jim. How do you feel?"

"I'm fine, Bones. Hate to admit it, but I'm anxious to get back to work."

McCoy crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, this vacation certainly seems to have agreed with you, and despite your illness you're more rested and in better physical shape than I've seen for a long time."

Kirk threw a glance at the Science Officer coming through the door. "You can thank Spock for that. He made sure I behaved myself."

McCoy followed Kirk's gaze. "Perhaps Mr. Spock would like to qualify as one of my staff physicians."

Spock approached the examining table. "I assure you, Doctor, that would be my last choice of professions." His voice turned serious. "Has the Captain recovered from his illness?"

McCoy nodded. "Completely." He looked at Kirk. "Damn shame, though, Jim, that your vacation had to be ruined."

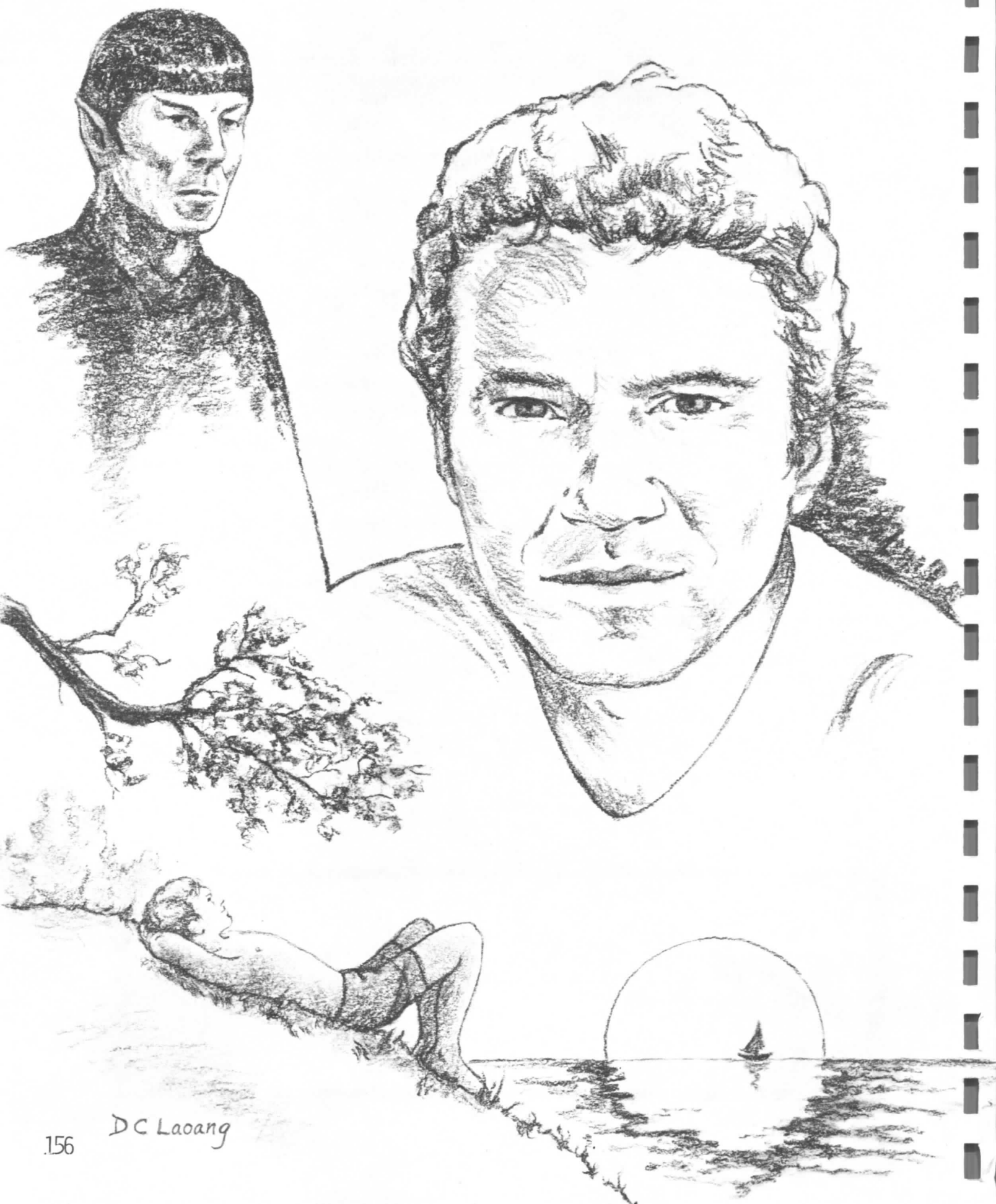
Kirk smiled. "I thought so too, for a while, but you know..." his eyes met Spock's, "it wasn't really." He hopped off the table before McCoy had a chance to consider the statement. "Let's go, Spock. We have a ship to run."



*The Federation, its military rules and Starfleet ideology
all dwarfed in importance -- Kirk had to be saved.*

SUSAN K. JAMES: CONTACT 5/6





NAMES

Your three names: James, Jim, Jimmy -
Each so different in its connotations,
Yet all are some aspect of you.

James - all formality -
The name called by parents or stern elders
To draw your attention to serious matters
Away from trivial boyhood joys
Too soon put aside.

Jim - an equalizer -
The starship captain on a level with his crew.
All friendship - a comfortable name -
And a special moment an alien can never forget:
"Call me Jim now - we're friends, aren't we?"

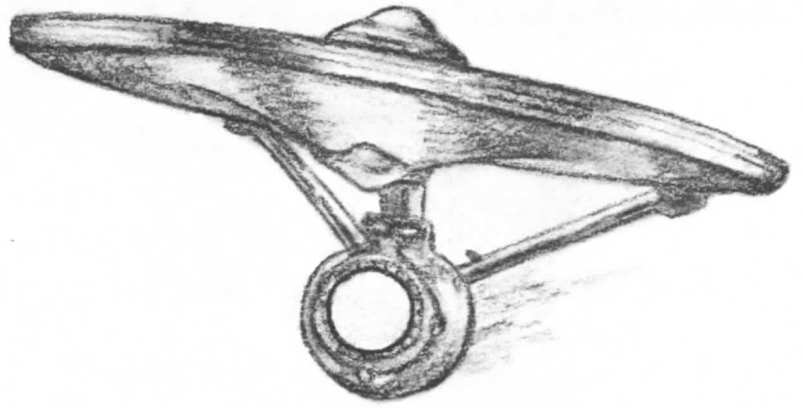
Jimmy - that baby name
Sung by adoring parents
And happy playmates
Of a freckle-faced youth
Too soon to shoulder burdens beyond his age.

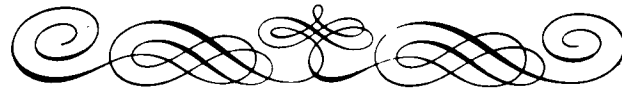
I have only one servicable name -
Yet your voice can change that mono-syllable
A thousand different ways:
It's, "Spock," *there's danger,*
Or, "Spock," *explain this;*
There's, "Spock," *don't leave me when I'm hurt,*
Or, "Spock," *I'll stay with you until you're well.*
And I can even hear, at times, in that one word,
"Spock," *I love you.*

Someday I'll cradle you in my arms
And whisper the childhood name - Jimmy -
Summoning the boy who lives in you still.
If I could shed the veneer of adulthood
And be the child I was,
I'd run to meet the playmate
Who existed only in my dreams.

Your three names: James, Jim, Jimmy:
Each as beautiful and as multi-sided as you.
Yet I would give you another,
Meant only for my use.
If gods are kind, and fortune smiles,
I would call you "T'hy'la",
And have you know every nuance of the name.

Dorothy Laoang





To Believe In You

*How may I help you, my friend,
When I don't understand this obsession of yours?
This single-minded fixation to destroy
Something which cannot exist.
The need to revenge a long suffered pain
And atone for a misplaced guilt never released.*

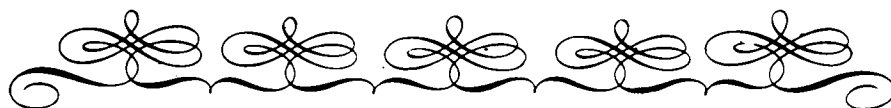
*How may I comfort you, my friend.
When you won't let anyone touch your pain?
When you hide it under sharp stinging commands,
Orders snapped tightly, and men driven hard,
To disguise the fear that you feel for your crew,
That they might be sacrificed in the price of this hunt.*

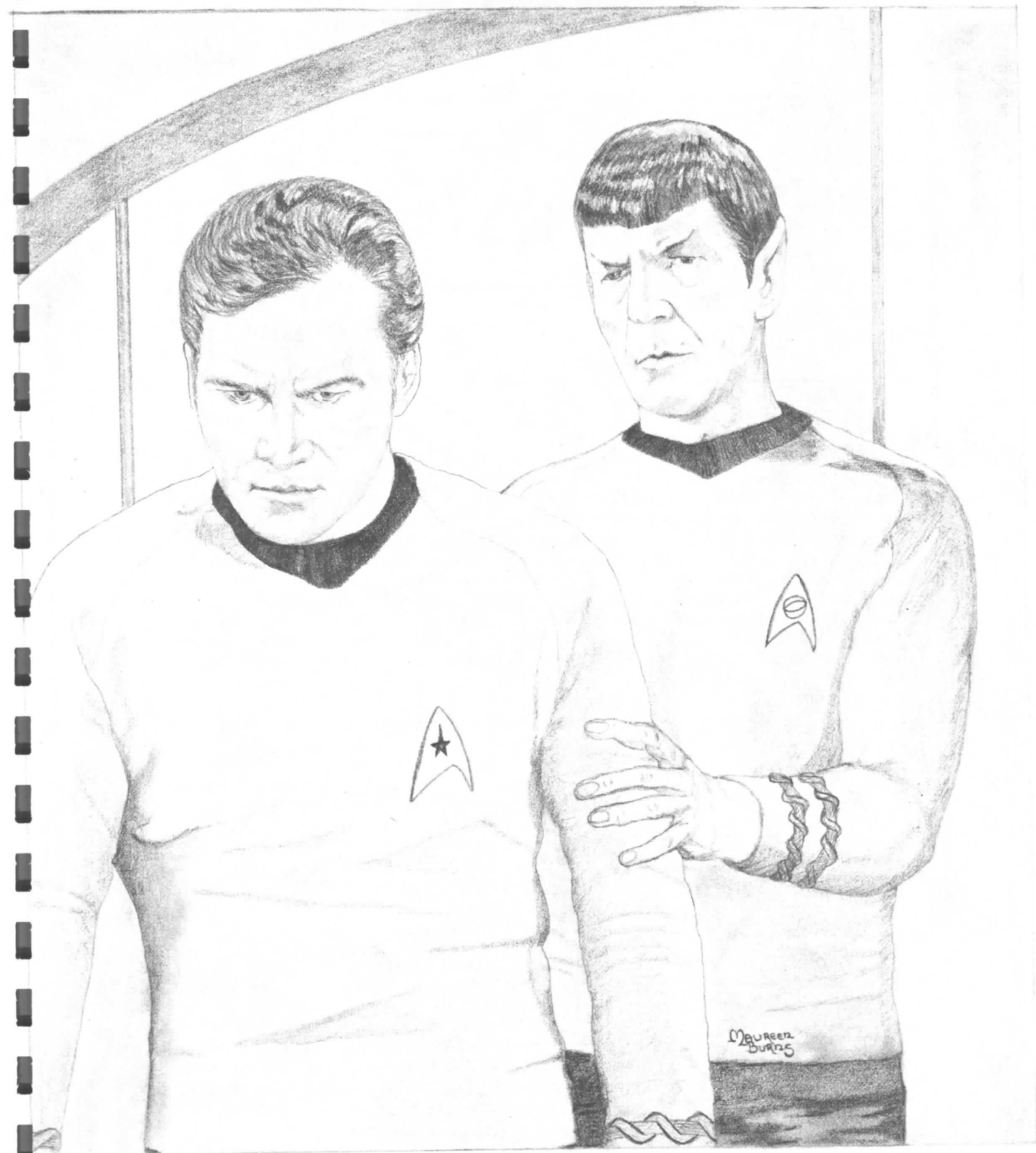
*Yet how can I not believe in you, my friend,
When you claim it's a creature, sentient and precise?
When you have instincts that are seldom wrong,
Intelligence and reason to guide your way,
And a finely-honed intuition when all else fails,
That I've learned to follow despite what logic might say.*


*How may I ask you to trust in me, my friend,
That I will help you find this creature of yours?
Too long have I observed you to dismiss your hunches,
Or the determination that drives you when you know you are right.
For I know that your compassion or self-imposed pain
Will never cloud your judgment on which our lives depend.*

*An answer must lie somewhere if you perceive it,
Yet even if no proof of your opinion can be found,
If our searches are negative, confirmation lacking,
And all further action must be taken on faith,
Then still would I place my trust in your judgment
If for no other reason than my belief in you.*

CRYSTAL ANN TAYLOR







CORNERSTONE

Elaine Wells

Kirk stood amid the smouldering ruin of the administrative building as he watched the last of the relief teams beam up to the haven of the Enterprise. When he was alone, his shoulders slumped, as events of the last forty-two hours overtook him. He swayed dizzily, remaining upright only by supporting himself against the rubble which had once been a graceful sculpture celebrating the achievements of this small, thriving community.

His body, desperate for the rest it had been denied for too long, was beginning to fail him; McCoy had long since forbidden him the use of stimulants. Eyes, red-rimmed from fatigue and the irritating effects of the ash borne on the wind, stared blindly at the desolation around him, scarcely able to comprehend the magnitude of the tragedy which had overwhelmed Mykanos.

Seismic activity had not been indicated when the initial surveys had been carried out seventy-five years previously; there had been no indication that they would ever pose a threat to this small, only partially-inhabitable, class M planet. The ship's computers were still analysing the data which sensors had been accumulating since their arrival.

The garbled distress call had been received as the Enterprise prepared to limp back to Starbase 6 for much-needed repairs and R & R after their encounter with the giant amoeba. Utilizing all the power that remained to them, it had still taken the Enterprise twenty-two hours to reach the doomed planet.

Too late, thought Kirk bitterly, *just too damn late*. Then he doubled over, retching and gasping as the debris carried on the *gusting* wind and scorching air caught at his abused lungs.

The crew had responded magnificently to the crisis, the rescue teams smoothly going into action as soon as they had achieved orbit, despite the incredible strains they had just been through. They had all worked so hard, he thought despairingly, *and for what...?*

He now knew himself to be the only sentient creature left alive on Mykanos.

He had twenty crew personnel seriously injured; Hernandez had died attempting an impossible rescue of one small, very frightened girl-child, trapped for hours in the ruin of her home amid her dead family.

An abomination of chaos...

Bitter anger swept through him as he clenched a previously lacerated hand around a shard of sculpture.

Damn it to hell... all their technology and expertise had been useless against the enormity of the task which had faced them.

... I will show you fear in a handful of dust...

Another needless reminder of mortality, of his own lack of omnipotence,

Ashes to ashes... The atmosphere was choked with ash, each inhalation a luxury. So many hopes had gone into the making of this colony. Except for the small, settling sounds of rubble falling and the crackling of advancing fires, all was silence.

His ears still rang with the cries of the dying.

The devastation caused by the earthquakes had been total. The air-station, with its potential rescue vehicles, had been obliterated with the first tremor. The areas where sensors had revealed pockets of life were too many for the crew alone to cope with, even utilizing the transporters, shuttlecrafts, and anti-grav units. Increasingly often the rescue work had to be carried out by hand, and with considerable caution.

Deciding at an early stage in the rescue operations that his work as co-ordinator could be achieved just as efficiently planet-side, Kirk had left the ship under Sulu's command, with only the skeleton crew necessary to maintain ship's orbit and to deal with the first influx of refugees remaining aboard.

They had too few rescue workers as it was. The medical synthesizers worked non-stop on the production of medication. All too often it seemed that the most they could offer to the people of Mykanos was a merciful oblivion from pain.

In his mind's eye came the memory of Spock's face, naked with anguish as he closed an old man's eyes, his fingers gently smoothing away the ravages wrought by hours of agony. He had died when they discovered his wife's body. Spock's hands... so very gentle; hands torn and marked by their hours of labor... They had never known that old man's name, but he had been only the first of many.

How many hours had they dug, made supports where none existed, and then dug again...? *We did so little... for so much gratitude. The incredible bravery of the children...*

Death and he were old enemies, but even though he and death had become

well acquainted over the years, he had not been prepared for this intensity of anguish.

The winds had changed direction, driving fires to the most populated areas. With the extensive damage which had already occurred, and the Enterprise's over-extended resources, they had no means of extinguishing them all.

So the Captain had had to decide who should live and who must die - must admit he couldn't save them all.

There was no possible protection from living with the consequences of that choice. The already acrid air had taken on a new stench. There were no neat crosses or antiseptic deaths here, only the smoke of people burning.

... I had not thought death had undone so many...

Reality blurred as Kirk closed his eyes against the memories that followed. With the fires still raging, the quakes had begun again, even the ship's sensors barely giving them warning. The very ground beneath their feet had opened, speeding the inevitable.

So what did his crew have to show for all their efforts...? Four hundred and ninety-two survivors - out of a colony of more than thirty-five thousand.

Somehow the survivors had been packed aboard. Somehow, thanks to the work Scotty had been engrossed in from the moment they had received the distress call, the life support systems would cope with the influx of additional personnel.

But at the moment, Kirk did not know if he could face those survivors; if he could sustain one more...

"Jim..." Spock's deep voice held an almost cautious note as he approached the filthy, well-singed figure of his Captain.

Slowly Kirk's head lifted from concealment, and Spock's face tightened in response to the grief in those golden eyes.

"Spock...?" Kirk looked vaguely puzzled, not having seen nor heard the transporter's effect. "What... I ordered you aboard..." Because of his raw throat, his voice was down to a husky whisper.

"You are needed aboard, Jim," the Vulcan reminded him gently, shaken by the bleak desolation in Kirk's face. He knew the exhaustion apparent in every line of the human's body was due more to the emotional strain of having commanded the entire operation, and then accepting the decisions he had had to make, rather than the unrelenting physical effort he had expended.

Automatically he reached out to support the shivering figure, to offer what minimal comfort he could, after having watched his Captain attempt to defy the natural forces which had overwhelmed them all. He also knew how exhausted Kirk had been at the time the distress call had been received; he had worn off the effect of the stimulants as he planned,



LYDIA MOON

Everything that could be done, had been done. It simply had not been enough; their resources were too limited. But logical acceptance of the realities of the situation did nothing to ease the pain they all felt.

His hands moving in gentle rhythm against the torn back of Kirk's command tunic, Spock said what duty demanded of him.

"You cannot remain here. You have a responsibility to the survivors, to make what speed we can to meet the relief ships. Medical resources are already stretched to the utmost... the majority of the crew are suffering from minor injuries which cannot yet receive attention, all are shocked. Your presence is required - they need you," he amended simply, as he drew Kirk closer.

He experienced a moment of fierce, illogical anger that this man should be expected to give any more of himself. An instant later, he recognized the futility of the thought. James Kirk was... James Kirk; he was incapable of giving anything less than all he possessed.

For a few short minutes, the outside world ceased to exist for Kirk as he let himself be supported by the blessed strength and understanding Spock offered; the warm reality of his presence... the strength that was so much more than a mere physical prop. Sometimes, it seemed to him that Spock was the cornerstone upon which he existed.

One day... one day when they actually had some time to themselves, away from their responsibilities, he must tell Spock exactly what that meant to him. One day...

For now, he had his crew and 492 survivors to consider. Reluctantly Kirk drew away from Spock, smearing the betraying signs of grief from his face as he prepared himself for what was to come. Then he lightly touched Spock's cheek with the back of his hand.

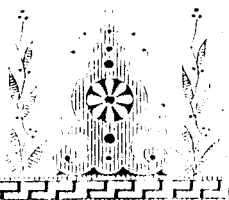
"Thank you," he acknowledged softly, "for being here when I needed you," and as Spock watched, a faint half-smile lightened the eyes holding his own.

Kirk reached behind for his communicator, his movements clumsy as he drew on non-existent reserves of strength. The transporter beam captured the two figures, Spock's face set in its usual impassive lines, while the Captain's possessed all the authoritative confidence that was expected of a starship commander.

... Knowing Spock was alive made the situation seem less terrible somehow, and he relaxed a bit....

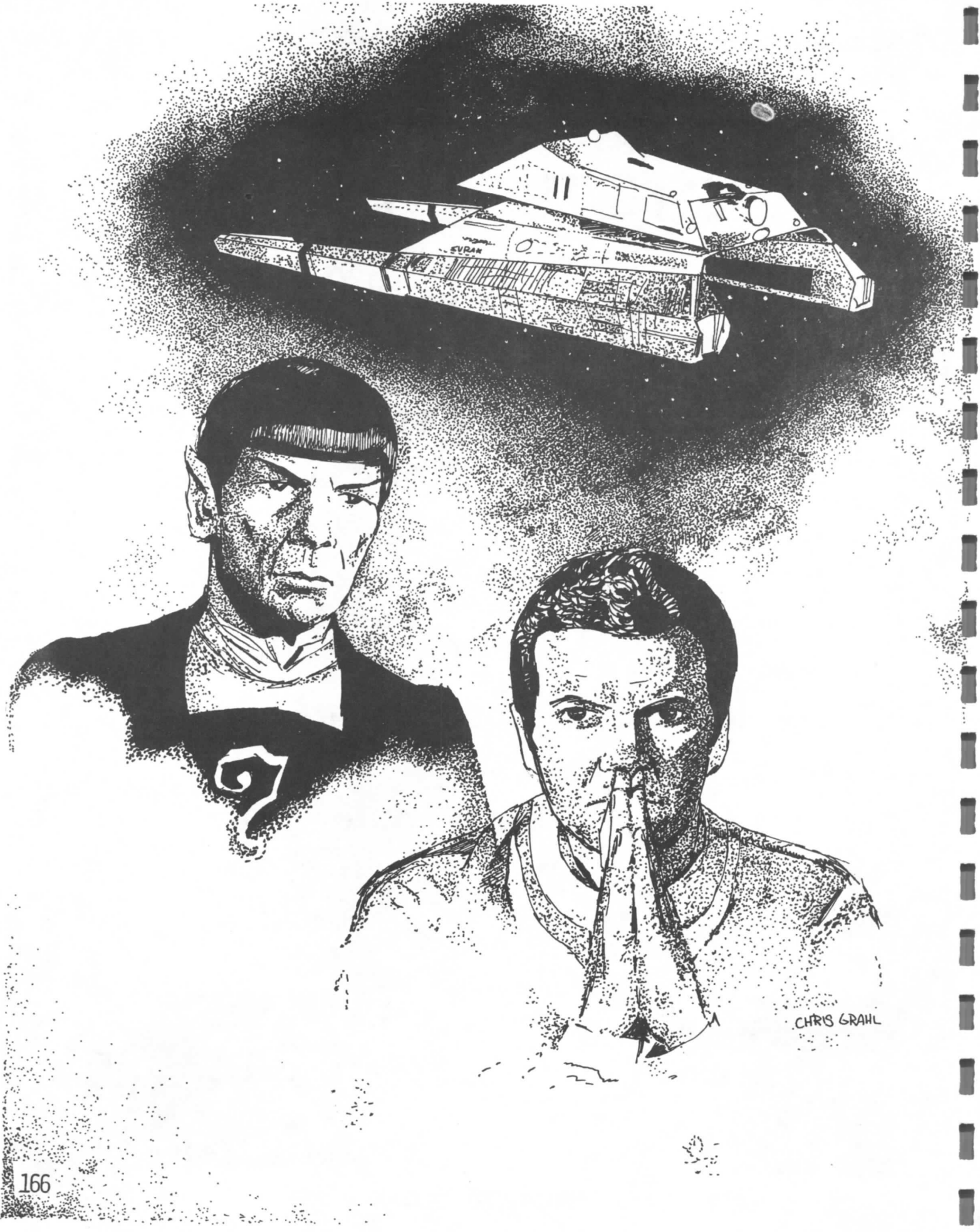
LINDA WHITE: CONTACT 5/6

VOICE OF MY SOUL



Our love is based on loyalty and trust
There is no need to test each other
No need to play games and hide
It is wonderful to have someone with
whom I can share my feelings and thoughts
Someone who does not judge and listens with his
heart
I have waited long to find the one
who makes my life complete and beautiful.





The Courier

A craft approaches - long range shuttle
From a distant desert world.
A courier, perhaps,
With urgent message, dispatched in haste
By the single occupant
Who, intent upon his purpose,
Hails the giant star-cruiser
And asks permission to come aboard.

It must be important
To cause the tiny vessel this frantic chase
Across the star-dotted nightwinds,
Seeking the lone, determined ship
Struggling like a bird with a broken wing
Toward the menacing blue unknown.

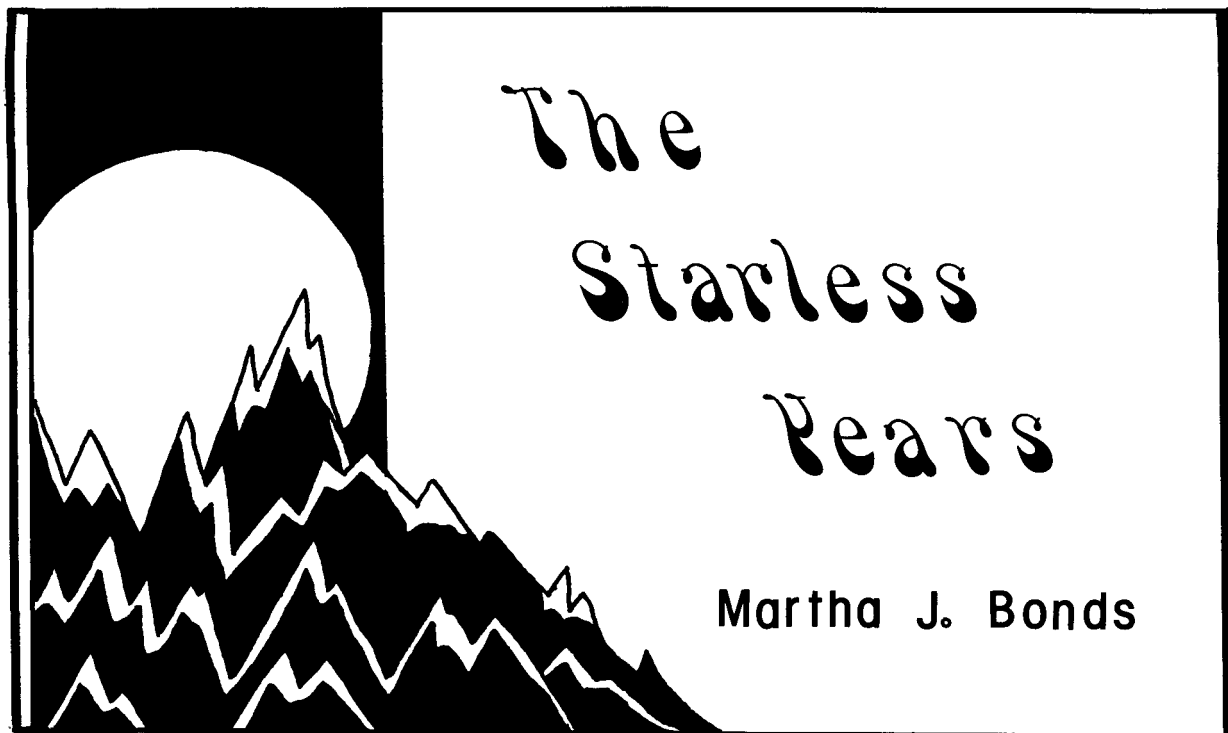
The message this courier brings is vital.
Perhaps the most important
Ever delivered in the galaxy's history.
It can change the course of the Universe
And the future of the one who gives
And the one who receives.

The prodigal returns;
An errant son still clothed
In the austere black of Vulcan's land
Driven beyond fear
To make this awesome journey
To re-awaken the agony and the ecstasy
That confrontation with his god will bring.

The time of meeting is at hand -
The courier has arrived - and formal words
Couch the secret message written
On the heart.
It must be understood
Its meaning has the power to save the stars...
And two lives.

BEVERLY VOLKER





Prologue

Captain James Kirk lay huddled on a bare cot in a corner of a Klingon detention cell, still slightly dazed from the physical punishment he'd undergone at the hands of his captors. Kirk had tried to rest, to gather the shreds of his control, but in the hour since he'd been returned to the cell, he had not been able to recover very much from the torture.

It had been worse today. There wasn't a place on his body that didn't feel bruised, his blood throbbed like slow fire through his veins, his limbs jerked with occasional muscle cramps. Kirk reached with a trembling hand to wipe sweat from his brow, then massaged his pounding temples. He forced himself to try to sit up on the cot, and managed to prop his aching body against the wall.

Blearily, he tried to look around the dimly lit cell. His eyes were watery and focusing was difficult. At any rate, there was little to see in the bare room. Across from where Kirk sat was another cot, the one on which Spock had slept fitfully during times when the Klingons had let him rest. Now though, Kirk was alone in the cell and the thought of what Spock might be suffering at the moment chilled him. The Vulcan was in no better shape than his Captain after three weeks of captivity.

While the things done to Kirk had been mostly of a physical nature, the Klingons had seized the opportunity to practice some particularly horrifying mental torture on their Vulcan prisoner, using a combination of drugs and devices which, Spock had told Kirk, made the mind-sifter seem simple and painless by comparison.

They were the prisoners of renegade Klingons, transferred to two different ships after their capture, then to first one outpost and later a second in order to evade potential rescuers. Now they were space-born again, travelling farther into unknown territory each day. Their captors boasted to Kirk and Spock that they were quite aware of precisely who it was that they were torturing, and that the information gained by breaking the Starfleet officers would bring them back the power and respect that they had lost in the Empire.

Kirk had not yet begun to worry that he or Spock would break under the torture, but throughout the long agonizing days and nights, a very real fear that they would not be found began to grow. These Klingons were not skilled investigators, they derived satisfaction

from watching the suffering of the Human and Vulcan and at times they became so involved that they grew careless, inflicting punishment that was too severe even for their purposes. It was quite probable, Kirk knew, that he or Spock could die under their hands, perhaps without divulging any information, but they would die nonetheless.

A familiar leaden weight descended over Kirk -- depression. He couldn't help himself, even though he realized the feeling was a symptom brought on by the aftermath of the day's physical abuse. He began to listen for the sound of Spock being returned to the cell, and at the same time to dread seeing him. He knew the Vulcan was likely to be in bad shape when they finished with him today.

Kirk eased himself back down into a reclining position on the cot, still feeling shaky from his own ordeal. He'd need to rest as much as he could in order to be able to help Spock when he was brought back.

The Captain had dropped into a light doze when, an hour later, he heard sounds outside in the corridor. His mind snapped to full alertness and he noticed that his physical condition had improved somewhat, but his own state was forgotten as he noticed something strange in the noises he heard.

He could discern the heavy footsteps of two pairs of booted Klingon feet and -- he strained to listen -- a scraping, sliding sound. The guards were dragging something with them. *Someone*. Kirk sat up on the cot, every muscle tensed in concern. Spock had been weak and in difficulty following the sessions with their captors, but he had always been able to walk back to the cell.

The heavy door opened and in the harsh light from the corridor, Kirk could see that Spock hung limply between two guards. They pulled him into the cell, let go of his arms and turned to leave as he fell. Kirk heard the door clang shut as he moved to bend over the Vulcan's prostrate form.

Spock seemed beyond sense, not even responding to his own name, though Kirk called it repeatedly. Intermittent tremors shook his thin frame and the Human noted the uncharacteristic chill feel of his skin. *Shock*. Fighting back the dread that raced through him, Kirk encircled Spock with his arms and struggled to get him to a bunk.

Seated on one of the cots, Kirk leaned back, holding Spock to him, pulling a rough blanket over them both. The Vulcan lay apathetically, his eyes half-closed. Kirk kept speaking to him, murmuring calm reassurance, until at last Spock seemed to rouse a little.

He raised his head as if trying to focus on Kirk. The motion seemed distressing; Spock's face contorted in pain and he twisted feebly in Kirk's arms, shaking again.

"Spock? Tell me... "

The Vulcan's hands came up to press savagely at his temples. "My head... hurts so bad... "

"Easy." Kirk gently loosed the Vulcan's clenched fingers from their spasmodic hold, then began massaging Spock's temples and forehead himself. "Let me do that."

Spock groaned. "I... can't think... "

"Hang on. You don't have to think right now. Just relax." Kirk continued his ministrations, working his fingers through Spock's hair at the nape of his neck, then returning to stroke his face.

Spock's hand, trembling slightly, came up to cover Kirk's.

"Better?"

The Vulcan tried to nod, but the movement made him gasp. "... much worse... than yesterday."

"I know. It was pretty rough for me today, too. I've been worrying about you."

Spock's eyes widened. "I... didn't talk. Jim, I'm sure... "

"I know, Spock. Shh..." Kirk tried to soothe. "I only meant I was concerned about what they'd do to you when you didn't."

The Vulcan's eyes squeezed shut and he shuddered. "Jim? What time is it?"

"I don't know. I've been back here at least a couple of hours." Kirk answered automatically, but he regarded Spock closely, concerned by his apparent confusion. "You've lost track?"

"I... yes. I can't focus on it. I've lost... too many hours."

Spock was trembling again and Kirk tried to calm him. "Don't think about it, Spock. You're just upset right now. It'll come back to you."

Spock became even more agitated. "No, no. This is what I feared. What they're doing to my mind..." Abruptly, he pulled away from Kirk, got unsteadily to his feet and lurched across the room. He leaned heavily against the wall, the picture of abject misery, then turned to face the Human. "I'm losing myself, Captain. Don't you see? Resisting them is... destroying my sanity."

The Vulcan's distress was a palpable thing, reaching across the room to shake Kirk with its intensity. Painfully, he drew himself off the cot and crossed to stand in front of his friend. His concern deepened to a very real fear at the wild look in Spock's eyes, but he kept his voice deliberately quiet and unemotional. "Exactly what do you mean?"

For a moment the Vulcan looked as though he had retained some control, that he could rationally explain, then all logic fled from his eyes and he pushed Kirk aside, moving toward the heavily barred cell door.

Like some crazed animal, the Vulcan lunged against the barrier, trying to rip out the hinges, clawing at the metal until it bloodied his hands. When he could not budge the hinges, he threw himself again and again against the door, ignoring Kirk's shouts, his useless efforts deepening his frenzy.

Lost in a terror-filled world of his own, Spock kept repeating one phrase over and over. "Must get free... must get free..." Frantic, Kirk grabbed him, struggling with all his strength to hold on. The Vulcan tossed him aside, completely oblivious to who he was and what he was doing.

Kirk picked himself up off the floor. He reached out and struck the Vulcan hard across the face. "Stop this at once!" He made it an order.

Spock faltered, paused in his frenzy. He turned to look at Kirk, confusion filling the dark eyes. One hand came up to touch his cheek where Kirk had struck him. "Jim?" The whispered word came out as a harsh croak.

Kirk moved to reach out to him, but Spock staggered back a step, leaning against the door. "Please, Spock." Kirk, desperate now, wondered if he had lost him completely.

The Vulcan's knees gave way then, and he sagged into Kirk's waiting arms.

They sat there on the floor, huddling together, conscious of the scene just past and of their vulnerability, yet somehow their physical closeness helped shut out the horror for a time. Spock remained conscious in a dreamy, quiet way. Kirk held him, stroking his face, massaging his temples, soothing him wordlessly.

Finally, Spock drew a deep breath. When he spoke, he sounded nearly normal. "I will be insane, Jim. I don't know how much longer I can hold on."

Kirk tightened his arms around the too-thin frame. Madness would be worse than death from the Vulcan's viewpoint, he knew, and the Human tended to agree. He didn't know how it would be to see Spock in that kind of condition. *Three weeks... would it be illogical to hope for rescue now? No, better face facts. We've had it this time.*

"How can I help you, Spock?" He put the question gently. "I don't know, I've tried to come up with a way to break out of here, to get away from these bastards, but..."

"I know. We've thought of every possible contingency, yet we are still prisoners," Spock sounded resigned.

"Then there's got to be something we can do from in here, some way we can thwart them, or at least help each other."

Spock was silent for a while, and Kirk wondered what he was thinking about. At length the Vulcan spoke, making what Kirk realized was a difficult admission.

"I've never been so afraid, Jim. When they drug me and use that device on my mind... I'm so alone, so cold, so... terrified..."

"Oh, God, Spock." Kirk trembled, pulling him closer as if to block out the image of his suffering. "You're not alone. I'm here now..." He broke off as an idea occurred. "Spock? Would melding with me help any? I don't know if it would protect you when they come back, but maybe it could strengthen you."

Spock reached up, placing his hands on either side of Kirk's face, though not in position for a meld. "Jim... Jim..." His voice was low, full of awe and devotion, his eyes looking deep into his Captain's. His arms encircled Kirk and he hid his face against the Human's shoulder. "No. I couldn't ask that, couldn't hurt you that way. I... I'm not myself."

Kirk let one hand settle gently on the bowed head. "Who's asking? I offered. Besides, I think it could be reciprocal, help us both. I haven't been feeling too good lately, either, physically or emotionally."

Spock looked up, meeting his eyes again. "Forgive me, Jim. I've been thoughtless of your condition." He reflected a moment. "Yes. Perhaps a meld could be mutually beneficial."

Kirk was gratified that Spock was responding to the idea. With something positive to think about, the Vulcan's outlook seemed to improve.

"Such a meld," Spock went on, " *could* be used to strengthen us when they resume their -- persuasion. I could establish a kind of link..." His voice trailed off as he considered the possibility.

Kirk hesitated. "I don't know, Spock. I'd do anything for you, you know that, but what if my pain gets through to you, too? Wouldn't that worsen both our problems?"

The Vulcan's eyes, hungry for support and comfort, searched his face. "You're right. And my mental distress would no doubt cause you difficulty. My shielding is not at its strongest. But it would be good... to have you so close." He sighed, trying to regain some composure. "Did they hurt you badly today, Captain?" He moved as if to pull away. "You must be uncomfortable."

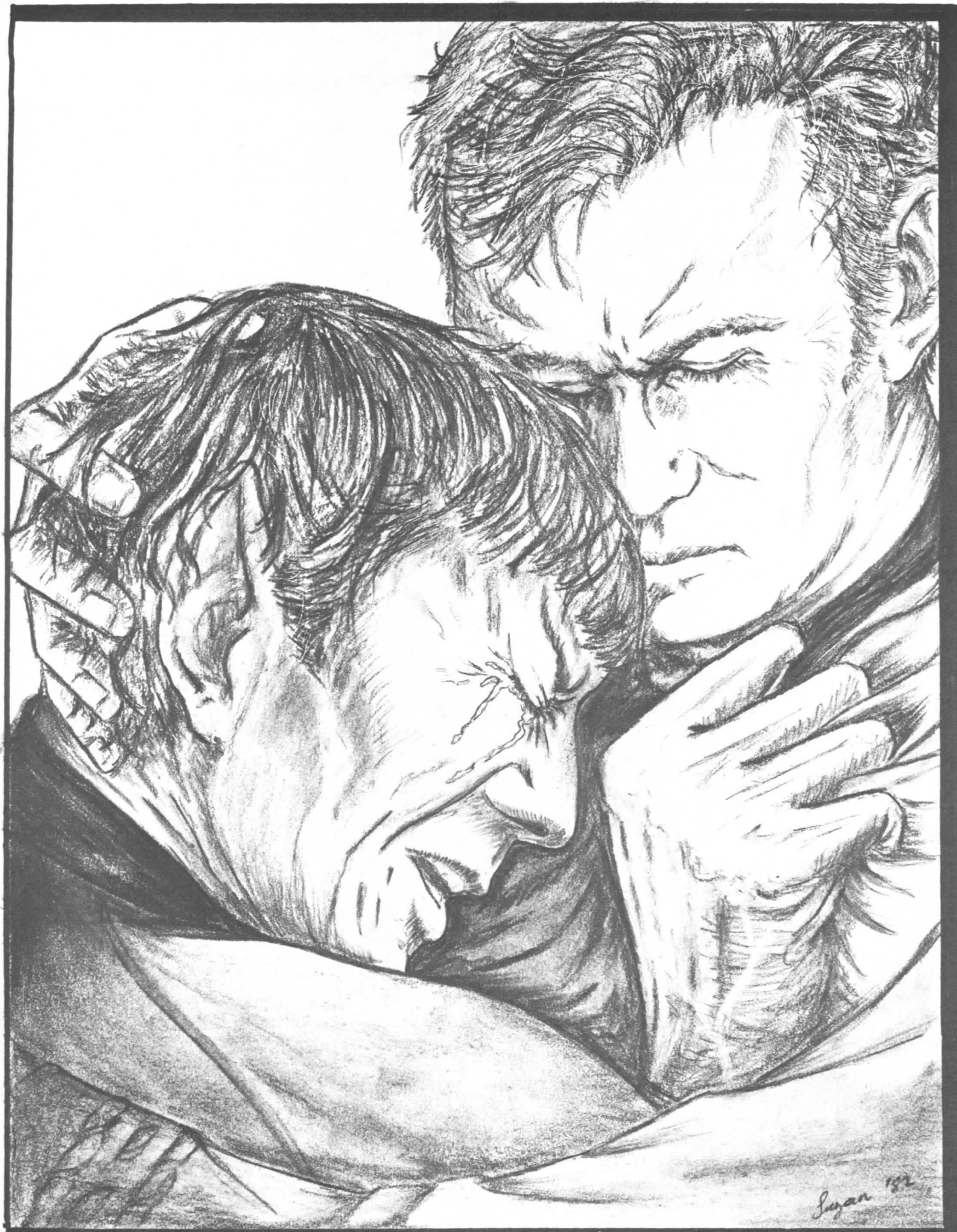
"No." Kirk held him securely. "Stay here."

"Perhaps then, I could... ease your pain... the meld -- if we don't try the deeper link?"

Kirk hurt, down deep inside, and the pain was far worse than that caused by anything the Klingons had done to him physically, worse than the depression he'd been feeling earlier. That they could have reduced Spock to such a state of awful vulnerability, admitting to fear and pain, was more than Kirk could stand. At the moment, he had no way to strike out against those who had done this to them, he only knew he wanted to comfort Spock, to find the safe haven of the Vulcan's mind, a little time for peace and sharing between the two of them.

Spock's hands were trembling. Kirk held them, willing his own nerves to steady. "Come. Be close. We need this, need each other..." His whisper trailed off as Spock knelt facing him, reached to align his fingers on his brow...

He was floating, accepting, willing away his own pain and Spock's, reaching for the contact with all his mind and spirit. And Spock was almost there, reaching, finding renewed strength in the promise of merging. Almost there....



A ripping, shrieking agony tore them apart, blasting through their minds and slamming them away from each other. The nearly achieved contact was severed so abruptly that it left Kirk feeling weak and nauseous. He lay on his stomach, stunned and oblivious until gradually his senses began returning to normal.

A tiny sound caught his attention. He lifted his head, wincing under a tremendous surge of pain. Spock lay face down in the opposite corner of the cell, murmuring incoherently.

Kirk couldn't get up, the pain in his head was blinding. Somehow, he crawled toward Spock and, after a time, managed to call his name.

The Vulcan responded, turning toward the voice that called. He struggled feebly to get to Kirk.

"What happened?" The Human's voice was a bare whisper.

"S-sorry, Jim. The pain -- my fault. I can't control, can't meld with you. They -- they've taken everything... insane, I'm going insane."

Spock rolled onto his back. In the dim light, Kirk could see trails of wetness on his face.

"God, no." Kirk's headache was fading to a bearable level; he managed to sit up. He trembled again, but more from rage this time. "No, Spock," he repeated, pulling the distraught Vulcan into his lap. "Don't... don't do this. I'll kill them for doing this, for making you cry."

"Vulcan's... shouldn't cry..." Spock moaned, sobbing now. "I must... control."

"Damn. Goddamn."

"I just... wanted you... so much... to meld... to be with you..."

"I know. I know, Spock. Shh... hang on, now. Try to... hang on."

Kirk lay back, pulling Spock into an embrace alongside him. Gradually, the Vulcan quieted, reaching up with awkward tenderness to touch Kirk's face. "Did I hurt you?" he asked. "They hurt you. I shouldn't have..."

"Don't talk. It doesn't hurt now. Save your strength," Kirk was badly frightened. It was one thing to hear Spock state quite rationally that the torture left him terrified and that he feared insanity would be the result of it, but quite another to see him so out of control. Somehow, this breakdown was even more frightening than his crazed attempt to break out of the cell. Kirk let the hate he felt for their captors fill his mind. It was the only strength either of them possessed now.

Spock went on stroking his face, seeming to gain some measure of control as he comforted the Human. Gradually, lying close and holding one another, there on the bare cell floor, they drifted into an uneasy sleep.



The pain and emotional upheaval had been exhausting. Neither officer woke until the cell door clanged open. Bright artificial light fell across the floor and the guards loomed over them. Still lethargic from the previous day's tensions and suffering, neither man stirred until the guards reached for Spock.

Kirk struck out at one of them and felt the jarring pain of a heavy boot kicked into his side. He doubled up as the Vulcan was dragged from his arms, out of his reach and toward the door.

Kirk rolled over. "Spock..." His First Officer met his eyes and Kirk's heart twisted

in sympathetic pain. The proud Vulcan features were set, determined, and Spock, even being dragged along the floor had managed to retain his seemingly impervious dignity.

Another day...

The door slammed shut. Kirk got unsteadily to his feet and went to sit on his cot. They'd be coming for him soon.

He couldn't relax and got up to relieve himself at the facility in the corner, then paced nervously, worrying about Spock, wasting strength he knew he should try to conserve. He sat down again, then lay back, willing his muscles to unknot. Nearly an hour passed.

The harsh grating sound of the door lock being opened startled him. Kirk sat up, tense, full of anger and resistance. The guards entered, glaring, seemingly uneasy and hating him more than usual.

"What's the matter?" Kirk taunted beligerently. "Getting tired of our games?"

One of the guards cuffed him hard across the mouth. Kirk sat back up. "I don't think I'll go along with you today. I think I'll be rescued instead. You know -- the calvary comes over the hill?"

The guards exchanged a look Kirk could not interpret; something like fear, then anger shone in their eyes. "If you are found, it shall not be in good condition," the second guard spat. He hit Kirk again, then pulled him to his feet.

The other aimed his disruptor. "Strip off those clothes, Earther. You don't need to advertise your rank and ship around here."

Kirk hesitated; the disruptor was waved menacingly. He complied with the orders, pulling off his tattered uniform, feeling a chill of vulnerability. He wondered what had provoked them to this. Had what he'd said about rescue struck a nerve?

The first guard shackled his hands behind his back, then held him as the second began to beat him. Strong Klingon fists connected with his head, his stomach, a boot slammed into his groin. Gasping, Kirk sagged to his knees. Incapacitated, he was dragged from the cell and out into the corridor.

Glaring light hurt his eyes. Kirk concentrated on controlling his breathing, gaining his equilibrium. The hall seemed twenty miles long.

At the end of the corridor were two doors. The one on his left, he knew only too well; it was his destination. To the right was the door through which Spock had been taken each day.

Kirk tried to stand, but the guards wouldn't allow it. Being dragged naked was an effective way of destroying one's pride, he thought wryly.

A sudden sound caught his attention. It was not the sound of any device, yet it did not seem natural. It was a deep, rasping, drawn-out gasp, a cry of pure pain that sliced through Kirk's every nerve. It was a sound Kirk had never heard before, never thought he would hear, yet one he recognized instantly. It was Spock.

The desperate, choking gasp came again, louder this time, catching on itself, beginning yet again, still louder, repeating as if the pain causing it had stepped up to an even more intolerable level. The cry became a wordless shriek, then a maddened, terror-filled, animal scream. It reverberated down the hallway, reflecting agony back as it cut through Kirk again and again. Louder, closer, more and more tortured... Spock of Vulcan, crying out as his mind was ripped away....

Kirk struggled against his captors and somehow, knew that he was screaming, too, screaming and going mad and resisting and losing as black unconsciousness descended under the pounding fists of his tormentors.

One

The world glowed green and golden at the break of day. Cut into the ancient rock of a high hill, the temple of the warrior-god, Phelosius, faced the east and morning. As the dawn light warmed to brightness, a lone worshipper was revealed on the rough-hewn steps.

The man did not kneel as if in prayer. Unobserved, he sat upon the steps, leaning on his elbow and looking skyward. His horse, tethered to a tree below the temple, waited for his master with patience.

The man turned his gaze from the sky and regarded the temple statue. Phelosius was depicted in smooth, black stone, young and proud in battle dress. The people believed that though he had given up his life with them on the field of honor, he lived on, somewhere, and inspired them still. Atholos was the strongest of nation states, controlling two-thirds of its continent. For centuries, the people of Atholos, the warriors of Phelosius, had remained unconquered and at peace.

"Well, Phelosius," the man spoke up finally, "you're in for a surprise this time." The horse knickered; the man glanced around, wondering if anyone were near enough to overhear him. There was no one and he relaxed again.

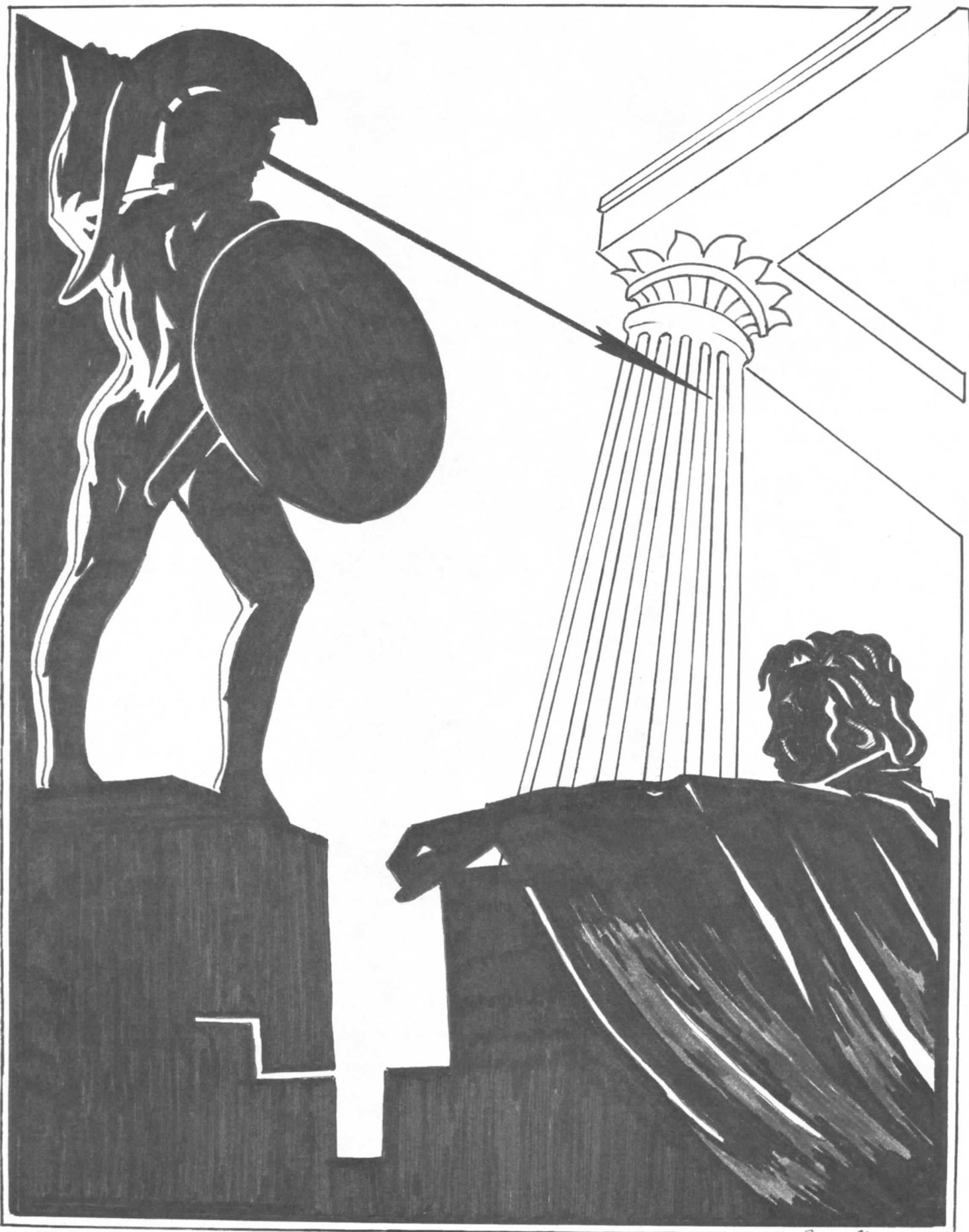
"An unbroken line for centuries," he mused to the statue. "A kind of royal military -- until now. And what happens when someone not in blood succession takes over rule of Atholos? Attack by Sarapta, the fiercest, most warlike people on this world, claiming *they* controlled this land in antiquity. And that they'll take it back again.

"They're right, aren't they Phelosius? It *was* them you fought, wasn't it, even though the legends give other names to your foes? Well, nobody knows for certain, I guess, but if fifteen hundred years isn't long enough to insure possession, I'll lead your people in this war against the Sarapta. It's said among us that they're slave-makers, killers. Who knows for sure after all this time? Just, if you're listening, Phelosius, let the people know I *can* lead them. They're my people, too, now."

Standing, the lone temple visitor threw one last look at the bright morning sky. The breeze blew his shoulder length, bronzed hair back from his face, revealing strong, smooth features and a look of determination that lit his expressive hazel eyes. He bent, picking up the cape that lay beside him on the steps. Knotting the cord at his throat, the man who, in another time and another place, had once been Captain James T. Kirk resumed the identity with which he now lived. Descending the stone steps and bounding onto the back of his chestnut stallion, he became again *vadir* Jankor Phelothos, adopted son of the deceased *vadir* Norkor Phelothos, and heir to the military state and war she was about to face.

Kirk's horse picked his way down the rocky slope. The big stallion knew the route well, and his rider could allow his mind to wander as he rode. This morning, his memories were crowding around him more forcefully than usual. He had come up to the temple to meditate, to be alone and to prepare himself to face his people. Kirk knew he was equal to the task, knew he had adapted to life here, on what he would have once regarded as a primitive world. Yet the memories would not go away, the longing for the life he'd lived among the stars was with him always, held silent usually, secret forever, but unburied and unforgotten.

Ten years... Kirk marvelled, still not quite believing it had been that long. He knew that physically he didn't look or feel ten years older, in spite of the condition he'd been in when he first arrived, or the rough life he'd lived since. Something about the food, the atmosphere here, people didn't age the same way. His body was hard-muscled, youthful and tanned, he looked the picture of health and prosperity, a perfect example of Atholos manhood.



Old Norkor had been well pleased with his adopted son. The ruler had known from the beginning that Jankor was different, a stranger to his world and his ways. It had been their secret. Even the name his adopted family called him and by which he was known here was an adaptation, his own syllables altered to fit the language and familial style. Kirk realized the aged warrior had never suspected just precisely how different the man he had loved as a son had been; that had been beyond his comprehension. Yet there had been an instinctive trust between them and a kind of understanding that had transcended their differences. Childless, Norkor had made the stranger his heir, had given Kirk a new life, new challenges and responsibilities. Without such purpose to his life, Kirk doubted he would have survived.

Still... ten years. Though his body did not reflect the passage of so much time, inside, in his heart and in his mind, there were scars that ran so deep they would never truly heal, agonies that made him feel as if he'd lived a hundred lifetimes. He seldom dared examine them too closely. The knife edge of pain was always there, just under the surface of his carefully erected present, his name, his position. It was not a bad life, at times in fact, it seemed quite satisfactory. Yet, whenever happiness seemed within his reach, the unending ache of remembered glories, of dreams realized and those left unachieved, would return to haunt him and destroy the peace he sought. And, most of all, there was the unending, aching loneliness...

Now, unwilling, his mind rolled back to the dark day of awakening on this world whose name he did not know.

His body ached with pain, trembled from exhaustion. There was a dim recollection of wandering aimlessly across rugged, hot terrain, but his memory of that was clouded, the visions unreal. The first clear images he could recall were those of the strangers' faces bending over him as he lay collapsed on thick, scratchy grass. Though their language was unfamiliar, he could easily recognize the expressions of concern and surprise as they spoke to him and about him. An old man and a young woman -- he'd learned much later that she was Norkor's niece, Theedra. They had been gentle with him, wrapping his bruised and naked body in soft cloth, giving him drinks of a sweet, warm wine that made him float away from his pain. He drifted for a time, coming to again as they carried him into a camp and laid him on richly brocaded cushions in Norkor's tent.

They treated his superficial wounds, tried to communicate with him. At first, he was so weak that he could do nothing but entrust himself to their care; later, as he regained some measure of his strength, he began to fear that his sense of safety with them was false, that his tormentors would return for him again.

Tormentors... gradually his numbed mind reasserted itself, forcing him to examine his situation. He was alone, no longer aboard the renegade Klingon ship. His dazed mind formed many questions: what had happened? How had he gotten here? And -- most importantly -- where was Spock?

Kirk tried to think back to the last events aboard his captor's vessel, but beyond the unending, tormented screams that he had heard coming from Spock's torture room, and the vicious beating he'd received trying to get free to go to the Vulcan's aid, there was nothing, a complete blank in his mind until foggy consciousness returned, here.

He tried to remember as much as he could about that last day in captivity. There had been the brief moment when he'd thought his words of forced bravado had struck a nerve, when he'd remarked to his guards that the calvary would be coming over the hill for them. A rescue by Federation troops, even by the Enterprise herself, had perhaps been imminent. The Klingons must have had some reason to think so, anyway, since they had apparently dumped him on this backwater world. Getting rid of the evidence?

What had become of Spock remained uppermost in his mind. Kirk kept trying to communicate with the people who'd found him, using gestures and the few words of their language he'd picked up to ask if they'd seen anyone else nearby when he'd been found. No, they indicated, and there had been no evidence of a body.

A sick dread began forming a knot in Kirk's stomach. For a long time, he tried to ignore it, to concentrate on regaining his strength. He decided to search for Spock as soon as he was able. The Klingons must have dropped them off and in their abused condition, they could easily have become separated. Kirk must have wandered for miles before being found by Norkor.

They could -- they must find each other, Kirk told himself repeatedly. He tried to keep up his spirits, believing that they would soon be discovered by the Federation ship that had been on the Klingon's trail. One night, still in a very depleted condition, he had staggered out of Norkor's tent to look up at the stars in an attempt to get a fix on his location. The knot of anguish had grown that night.

Kirk sank to his knees at the tent entrance, his eyes fastened on unfamiliar star patterns in the night sky. They'd been travelling with the renegades for three weeks, from one outpost to another, farther and farther away from Federation space. Now, completely disoriented, he had no idea where he was, or in what area of the galaxy the planet was located.

Lost...? Staring up at the strangely cold stars, he had known he should hang on, that he couldn't give up. Hadn't his crew found him under far worse conditions before? But, that night outside Norkor's tent, his badly beaten body and his fear for Spock had conspired to weigh down his mind, to force him to acknowledge facts. Tracing his whereabouts would be difficult. If he were ever to be found, it would not be for a very, very long time. Weak, aching all over with every movement, he had felt himself slumping, beginning finally to let go, to fall apart as his world disintegrated around him.

Norkor had found him huddled at the side of the tent, dry broken sobs being wrenched from him. Lost... lost... lost... The word reverberated from fantasy fear to cold reality, his mind accepted the condition as a fact. That had been the first defeat.

A burning desire to regain his strength overtook Kirk's every waking moment. He struggled to learn the language, to ask questions about the land and its people. He ate the food he was brought, finding it surprisingly good and healthful. Its taste did not matter, though. That it provided him with necessary energy was the only fact of importance.

He studied the maps they brought him, asked questions, learned. He exercised, finding strength returning to his battered body. Soon, he decided he was ready. Thanking Norkor, his niece and the others for their care and the horse they had loaned him, he took some provisions and maps and set out. They understood, having learned to communicate with him enough to realize how desperate he was to find the friend of whom he spoke.

Kirk's search had been short-lived. Less than a week after he set out, he was attacked and mauled by a huge, cat-like animal. When his horse wandered back to Norkor's camp, they had come to look for him once more. He had been closer to death then than when they'd first found him, his legs severely clawed and battered. It would be months before he was able to walk again.

Kirk remembered being dragged on a litter back to Norkor's camp. The aged leader had walked beside him, smiling gently, holding his hand as he regained consciousness. Kirk had tried to move, felt the searing pain of flesh that had been ripped and clawed and knew his search for Spock would have to wait, wait perhaps too long.

I was nearly killed, he had realized bitterly. One of those cats could have attacked Spock, he may have died out there, alone, weeks ago. Kirk could still hear the frenzied, feral cry of the cat as it leapt on him. Desperate cry, raw, torn from unwilling lips... Spock... The knot in Kirk's belly had wrenched and tightened. Spock may not even have been alive when I was dropped here. The Klingons... must have... killed him that day... Spock, you were in such agony. God, Spock, if only we could have melded, brought our minds together. Now there's nothing, no way to find you, to find out what happened to you. Sobs wracking his torn and bleeding body, Kirk had been drawn down into despair... the second defeat, the most final.

Time had passed slowly but inexorably. Kirk had gradually regained the use of his legs and under the tender, if primitive, ministrations of his mentors, suffered no permanent effects from the mauling. Their folk medicines and religious incantations were actually quite amazing. Just a few scars... mostly inside, he realized. The few outward scars made him more a part of the people with whom he lived. He no longer looked the stranger. He was one of them now, and apparently would be forever.

He learned their ways and their language, their history, their heritage. Gradually he made them his own. It mattered little that he was in technical violation of the Prime Directive. He was no longer a captain in the Starfleet; though he had never forgotten his

oaths and his service, he had finally accepted the inevitable, the practical. Though sometimes he cursed his strength, his will to live even through such as this, he would survive. He would make the best life for himself that he could. He had a lot of debts to pay here. Norkor had saved his life and his sanity more than once. It was a small matter if the Atholos were damaged by his presence.

Kirk often felt alone now that the old friend who had cared for him so long was dead. There was still Theedra, more sister than wife, who cooked his food and shared his tent, but never his soul, never his mind. She was a quiet, strong woman, a simple, giving person who never questioned his silences, his contemplative moods, his recurring depressions.

He was *vadir* now, and his people needed him. Kirk pulled out of his reverie as he approached the village. It was time to meet with his majori and plan the war against Sarapta.



The chestnut stallion trotted into camp and toward the elaborate tent of the *vadir*. Already preparing to attack Sarapta, the Atholos army had made an encampment a hundred miles nearer the border than the main city.

Kirk had observed his troops in the fields as he passed by. The men had made way for him, nodding in recognition and respect. He knew the names of many of the horsemen and officers, but the foot soldiers were too numerous. With a wry thought of the past, Kirk remembered having four hundred crew members under his command -- and knowing every name, the background of each man and woman. Now, he commanded thousands, most of whom he would never have personal contact with. Yet they vowed loyalty to him, followed him perhaps even more devotedly than had his old crew. They had been reared to do so, as had their fathers and grandfathers followed the *vadir* who came before him. The soldiers of the preceding generations, however, had never had to fight the nation of Sarapta. And they had never had to follow a leader who was not a blood descendant of Phelosius.

Kirk watched their eyes, appraised their reactions to him. There was nothing of distrust in their gazes and he drew assurance from their acceptance of him as leader. Perhaps it could work, after all. He could, in this war with Sarapta, truly become one of these people. In saving Atholos from the usurpers, he could pay back what Atholos had given him -- life and freedom. And perhaps the battle would serve as the end of his transformation from explorer and captain, to warrior and *vadir*.

"*Vadir* Jankor!"

At the call, Kirk brought his horse up short. The rider hailing him was Jahnin, one of his chief majori. Kirk raised his arm in the ritualistic gesture that was half salute, half greeting and pulled his stallion up alongside the other man's horse.

"What news, Jahnin?" He had sent a small party to investigate the latest moves the Sarapta were making.

"I have much to tell the council, *vadir*," Jahnin smiled. "It seems there is discontent in the realm of Sarapta."

"Discontent? All do not favor the way the war is to be waged?"

Jahnin's smile widened. "Not precisely. There is one who perhaps does not wish to wage war against us at all."

"Really? My curiosity is aroused, Jahnin. Come, let us meet with the others. You can tell us all of this most interesting news."

Jankor's counsel of majori convened in his tent. After a ritualistic sharing of bread and wine and exchange of information pertaining to the impending confrontation, the *vadir* turned to Jahnin.

"Attention!" He stood and the eyes of all were fixed on him. "Jahnin brings us news from inside Sarapta."

There was a murmur from the assembled group; it was quelled by a raised hand from the *vadir*. "Speak, Jahnin. Tell us what you have learned."

Jahnin came forward. "Your espionage techniques were most helpful, *vadir*," he began, in a tone of respect. "My men and I learned much. We saw that many of the traits we supposed the Sarapta to have are true indeed; they are fierce, warlike and strong. They keep slaves -- and no one they have conquered is a free man. They do seem to value justice; at least they speak the words, but how can one value justice and at the same time deny another's liberty? And they do believe that the Phelosius territory is theirs. Many of them are so enraged that their land is held by our people that they would kill one of us on sight to avenge a deed done generations ago. They will fight to the death to win this war -- and they will die by the thousands and murder thousands of us to take what they want."

He paused. Jankor noticed a slight hesitation in his voice at the conclusion of his remarks and encouraged Jahnin. "Yet...?"

The majori straightened. "Yet, indeed, *vadir*. There is a movement among them, a small faction of the population who believe that to fight a war with us would be in error."

"Why?" It was the deep voice of another majori, Tavad, who spoke. "Do they fear defeat?"

"No." Jahnin gazed around at the assembled warriors, then let his eyes lock with Jankor's. "They say they believe in peace."

There was a release of tension in the chamber at that revelation, many of the majori smiled, some, including Tavad, guffawed in derision. The murmurs grew louder.

"I always knew they were afraid of Atholos!"

"We can break those weaklings easily!"

"Sarapta shall be ours!"

"Enough!" The ominous voice of the *vadir* silenced the outbursts of his majori. "You are behaving like children. Jahnin has said that those who believe in peace are few -- that many Sarapta seek war. We have not heard him say they are weak or frightened of Atholos, only that there are some who do not wish to fight. Be silent and hear what else he has to say. Jahnin, who leads the peace-seekers?"

"I have not seen him, but I have heard his name, *vadir*. He is a powerful seer, followed by a devoted cult of believers. His name is Maraden."

"Maraden." Jankor turned the word over on his tongue. "A seer?"

"First Seer of the nation of Sarapta and their Chief Priest. They say he received his divine powers from one of their deities seasons ago. He has only recently begun to talk of this doctrine of peace."

"And how is the doctrine received?" The *vadir's* eyes narrowed, shrewdly calculating.

"Slowly. Some agree that justice must be attained peacefully. Yet others seek our lands. He was a trusted seer, with many devoted disciples..."

Jahnin's words trailed off. Jankor demanded, "And now?"

"Perhaps fewer follow his teachings and believe in his words."

"Interesting. Divide and conquer..." Jankor's mind wandered, thinking of possible strategies. If he were to help this sudden peace movement gain followers, he could perhaps conquer Sarapta. Discrediting this Maraden, however, might be equally to his advantage. Yet the thought of Maraden's doctrine was interesting. As Kirk, he had always attempted to find a peaceful solution to a problem.

"*Vadir*?" Kirk returned to the present. As Jankor, there was much for him to consider. He wished to learn more of the Seer Maraden prior to invading his land. Before Jankor could comment or dismiss his men, a rider pulled up at the entrance and was announced,

"A message from Sarapta, *Vadir*." The exhausted man came forward. He held out a length of cord knotted several times in the middle. Jankor took it in his hands. It was a *vrela*, a rope-like weapon formed from twisted strips of leather and plant fibers. Normally used in hand to hand combat as a single strand, the tangled cord could only mean one thing -- a request to meet to discuss a truce. "It is from the Seer Maraden," announced the messenger.

Kirk regarded the *vrela*. "We will arrange a meeting."

Two

Accompanied by four trusted bodyguards, the Atholos *vadir* traveled to meet with Maraden, First Seer and Chief Priest of the Sarapta. Jankor was still uncertain whether he should pursue peace with the warrior nation. Possible traps occurred to him, concern for his people and the future of Atholos. Within Jankor, there was still Kirk, the tactician, the strategist, yet he was of a culture so advanced from the one of this world that he seemed at times almost a visitor from the future. Though he had adapted, integrated himself as much as possible and become a part of the culture, oaths taken and believed in many years ago could not be entirely forgotten. It was academic now whether his life and position here might be considered a violation of the Prime Directive. As it was highly unlikely that he would ever return to the Federation, that was not something he usually worried about. Yet he still believed the non-interference rule to be a good one. A culture should not be influenced by outsiders. *Outsiders*... no, he was no longer an outsider after all these years.

Kirk resolved to be Jankor and Jankor alone in this situation, to make his decisions based solely on what was good for Atholos, as Norkor would have done. Norkor had been a man of peace, too, even as a military king. Thus Kirk, the soldier/ambassador could be Jankor, concerned with saving lives in Sarapta as well as assuring the future of Atholos.

He would meet with Maraden, decide whether the seer really wanted to propose a peaceful solution to the disagreement, and consider, from an Atholian point of view, where to go from there.

The tent of Maraden was a long, high-ceilinged affair, lit by torch-lamps and draped with woven tapestries of muted colors. Strong incense assaulted the senses upon entering, and the interior of the tent seemed unusually warm.

Jankor and his men were instructed to wait at one end of the tent in a dimly lighted area obviously intended for visitors. Heaping trays of fruit and bowls of wine were offered, and the travelers seated themselves in intricately carved wooden chairs.

The night was intensely quiet. Jankor thought it strange, since there had seemed to be quite a few soldiers and court people about when he and his men arrived. A few minutes after they had been ushered into the tent he did hear hurrying footsteps and low but emphatic conversation in Sarapta, then all grew quiet again.

The stillness was faintly disquieting. The *vadir* supposed that in watching the enemies from Atholos, the Sarapta guards had simply fallen silent, but he remained tense, alert. His men, too, were quiet, listening for any sound that might precede an attack. Jankor had come in good faith; he did not anticipate a trap, but the Sarapta were known for their duplicity.

After nearly an hour, there was a stir at the far end of the tent. A flap was drawn back, and in the flickering torch light, Jankor noticed the weapons displayed against the

wall reflecting the glimmer. He felt a tingle of anticipation. Suddenly, the *vadir* found himself hoping more than he'd earlier realized that Maraden really did wish to make peace. Years ago, Kirk had strived to avoid wars, and he couldn't completely forget that part of himself. Even though the Sarapta were known as the worst kind of savages in battle, he felt a sudden sense of expectancy. It was something he could not explain. Perhaps this Maraden was the leader who, with Jankor, could bring peace to a troubled time for both their peoples.

From the group of servants who had entered, one man came forward, identifying himself as Gelbar, chief aide to Maraden.

"The First Seer has completed his preparatory meditations and is ready to meet with you," Gelbar stated in flawless Atholian. Jankor and his men got to their feet and followed the aide toward the rear of the tent and the table at which negotiations would take place.

Again, the sense of anticipation captured Jankor's attention as the tent door lifted. The figure crossing the threshold must surely be Maraden. Tall, imposing, dressed in dark, flowing robes the color of midnight, he maintained, even under the folds of the hood he wore, an air of religious intensity and detachment.

Jankor stood and took a step forward, but Maraden still seemed to be in a meditative state, unaware of his visitors. He crossed to the table, yet even with only its width separating them, he did not look up or speak.

Instead, he reached a hand toward one of the servants, a wine-bearer. A goblet was handed him, the wine poured. Lifting the cup to his lips, Maraden sipped once, then set the black metallic goblet on the table. His hands reached up to lower the hood that had been half-hiding his face in shadow.

"Oh, my God!"

"*Vadir?*"

Kirk blinked, oblivious to the guard at his elbow questioning his sudden linguistic lapse. His eyes were locked with those of the Sarapta chief priest. *With Spock...!*

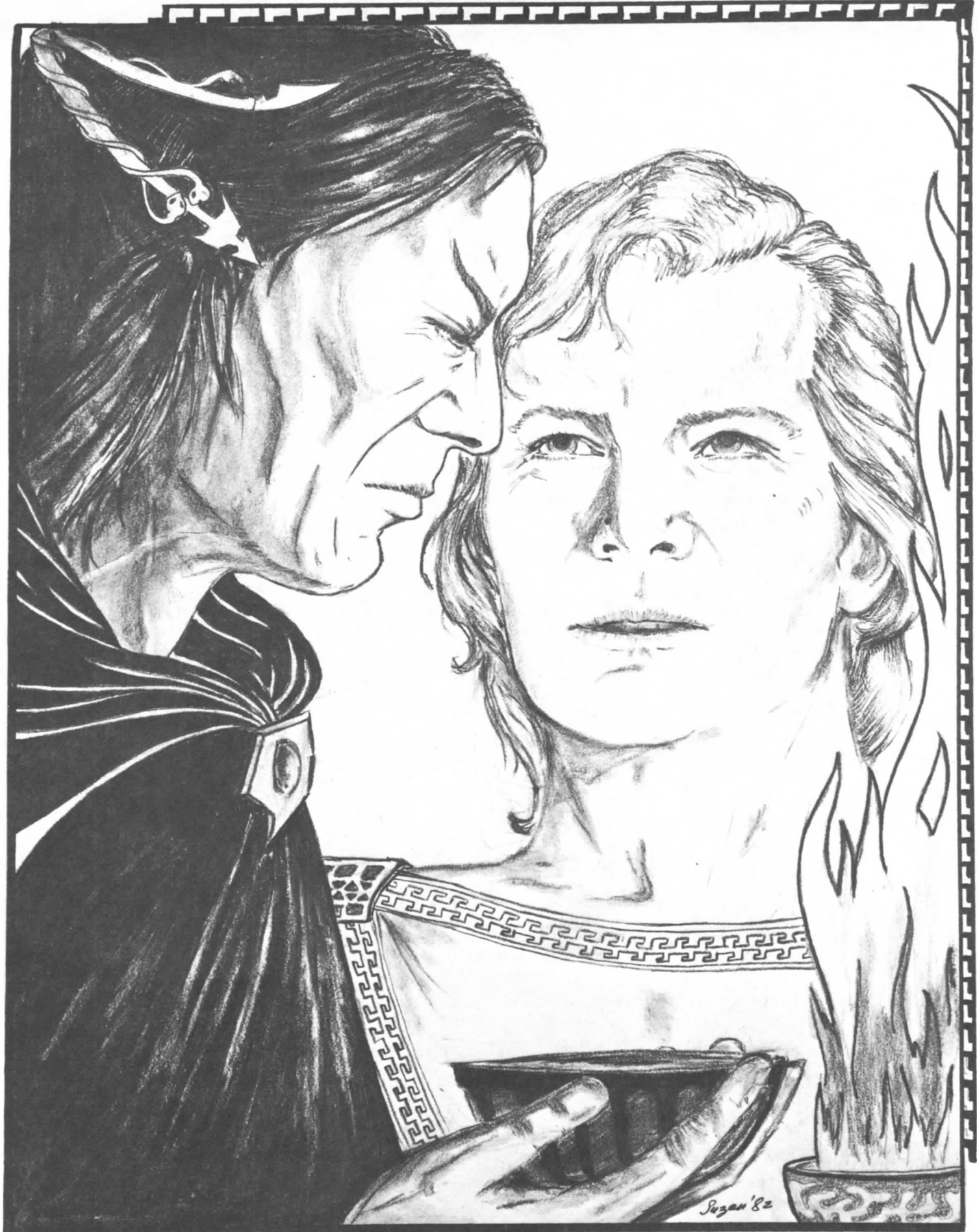
"My God," he found himself repeating. It *was* Spock. His features were molded into stern lines, his hair long and decorated with silver metal in the Saraptan style, but it was the Vulcan Kirk had so long believed lost, believed dead. Kirk stared into well-remembered deep black eyes, aware of the upswept brows and, beneath the concealing hair, pointed ears. Those eyes, he'd seen them so often in his dreams, now spoke of years of pain, years of torment.

Trembling, Kirk finally dared to speak his name, not caring that his aides and those of Maraden were aware of his distress. "Spock..." he managed in a hushed, awestruck whisper. "Spock, how...?"

His voice trailed off; he swallowed tightly. His gaze never left the eyes of the man facing him. Yet those hooded depths reflected nothing back for him, no surprise, no recognition, no welcome. "Spock, don't you know me?" Kirk regretted the anguished question instantly; it brought forth no comment or reaction. They were standing less than a yard apart and they might have been a thousand parsecs distant from one another. Kirk may have wanted more than anything in the universe to cross that distance, to reach out and shake Spock if necessary, to embrace him and banish the years of grief and loneliness, but he remained where he was, rooted in place by shock and the hastily drawn remnants of command discipline.

As Maraden lifted the goblet to his lips once more, Jankor glanced briefly to his guards, indicating with his eyes that nothing was amiss, that whatever aberration had caused his strange behavior was momentary and of little importance.

His attention was pulled suddenly back at the unexpected gasp which came from the strange/familiar person standing opposite him. Maraden paled, coughed and gripped the table with clenched fingers.



"Spock!" Kirk, forgetting his place entirely, reached out boldly to grab him as he fell. Maraden's guards were upon him in an instant. Jankor was hurried away, urged by his bodyguards and menaced by frightened Saraptas, as Gelbar bent over the gasping, convulsing chief priest.



Back in his guest quarters, Kirk paced, frantic and alone. He had convinced his men that he was all right, ordering them to stand guard outside the visitor's tent so that he could have some privacy. His thoughts were in turmoil, all his carefully erected barriers, the persona he had adopted as Jankor, had not prepared him for the meeting with Maraden. He had searched for Spock and he had never found him. He had worried and wondered and mourned for him, for the friend whose fate would never be known. Yet Kirk had not been prepared for the revelation that Maraden, chief priest of Sarapta, was Spock.

Still, he mused ruefully, I guess if I could become vadir of Atholos...

That Spock had survived at all was amazing. Kirk could in no way determine the chain of events that must have led to the Vulcan becoming Maraden. Still, the fact that Spock had greatly changed was obvious. There had been no sign of recognition in those fathomless black eyes, no suggestion of surprise in the taut body. The Vulcan Spock had been possessed of great control, and as Maraden, undoubtedly practiced a kind of semi-divine detachment, yet Kirk was certain that he would have caught even the slightest glimmer of awareness had one been there.

No, he had not recognized Kirk. *Perhaps amnesia... the result of the Klingon mindsifter?* There was no telling what was the condition of the Vulcan's mind. And Kirk feared there might be no chance of his finding out.

He shuddered, reliving the brief confrontation and the suddenness of its conclusion. *The wine...* For an instant, Kirk had thought Spock had choked on the liquid at recognizing him, yet that had faded as the Seer fell convulsing to the floor and his aides rushed to his side. No, there must have been something in the wine...

Kirk strode to the entrance of his tent and pulled back the arras. Two of his men stepped out of the shadows instantly, and a Sarapta guard came forward.

"What is the condition of your chief priest?" Jankor demanded.

The guard seemed at a loss for words. "Where is Gelbar?" the *vadir* went on. "I will have answers."

The wait for the chief priest's aide seemed hours long. Kirk was frantic with the fear that, having finally found Spock, he would lose him again. A small, irrational part of his mind still wanted to believe the catastrophic reaction had been one of recognition, yet it occurred to him that it would be logical to assume that an attempt on Maraden's life had been made. *Logical...* Kirk winced at the reference, his concern mounting. He had to have the chance to see Spock again, had to find the answer to the riddle of what had separated them all these years.

Finally Gelbar arrived and confirmed his fears. "My lord has been poisoned, sir," Jankor was told, "and we are seeking the perpetrators of the crime."

"Do you know if he'll be all right?"

Gelbar levelled a questioning gaze at the *vadir*. "We pray he will suffer no permanent ill effects."

Still too worried to be relieved, Kirk asked, "May I see him?"

The aide paused, then answered smoothly, "We do not know who wishes Maraden dead. While there are dissentors within our country, the more likely idea is that an enemy of Sarapta might attempt to kill him."

Jankor fixed the Saraptan with a cold stare. "We came at the invitation of Maraden. Knowing that his message is of peace, what would we gain by destroying him? Those who wish war with Atholos would be free to fight without his censure should Maraden be killed."

"An enemy of our land could gain the advantage if war were preceeded by the loss of a great leader. A nation divided cannot stand strong against an invading enemy." Gelbar's words were equally cold.

Jankor ignored the comment for the moment. "You have no clues."

"Nothing conclusive."

"Did you notice the strange stillness of the camp just prior to the meeting's start?"

Gelbar said nothing, but Kirk noted a flicker of interest in the man's eyes. He continued, realizing suddenly the possible significance of something he had heard. "There was a disturbance. I heard scurrying footsteps and a whispered conversation in your language. It seemed hushed and secretive."

Gelbar considered the information and nodded. "It is a possibility. There have been other threats against his life..."

Kirk winced, asking to see Maraden again. "I have come two days' ride for a conference that has not yet taken place. It would seem a discussion of peace is even more imperative at this time."

"He must rest tonight, but by morning he should be well enough to receive you,"

Jankor bowed in the Saraptan custom. "Send my wishes for his swift recovery."

The aide nodded his acceptance, then turned to go.

"And, Gelbar," Kirk added, "guard him well tonight."



The *vadir* spent a sleepless night, his mind worrying the same ideas over and over again. When morning dawned he still had reached few conclusions. If Spock truly did not know him, did not remember their years together aboard the Enterprise or anything of their relationship, he must have been hurt more severely than Kirk had first supposed. Perhaps, as Spock himself had feared, the Klingon torture had finally destroyed his mind.

Yet, looking back on the interrupted evening, there were fragments of images that were pure Spock. The ceremonial weapons, arranged against a backdrop of red so reminiscent of his quarters on the Enterprise, the statement by Gelbar that he had prepared for the meeting by meditating, even the doctrine of peace among barbarians he espoused all spoke of Vulcan and of Spock. There was some logic in the evidence that the alien from an advanced society had become a seer to these primitive people.

Yet there were changes in him. The way the man carried himself, the way he held himself aloof, and most of all, the lines carved into his expressionless face all bore testimony to limitless suffering. The eyes, cold, unfeeling, completely devoid of emotion, had seemed to bore into Kirk's and even now, remembering them, the Human's heart twisted in anguish.

If there were any spark of memory left within the Vulcan's hidden soul, Kirk wondered if he would ever be able to find it. Could they meet as the friends they once had been, or would they, in madness and grief, be forced to carry out the roles they had now assumed?

When Gelbar finally came for him, Kirk was more anxious than ever to see Spock. If he could just see him alone, he might gain the answers to at least a few of his questions.

Jankor's rather unorthodox request to speak with Maraden alone was met with some consternation by Gelbar, but the aide stepped inside his leader's sleeping tent and asked nonetheless. The Sarapta seemed to look at the *vadix* with a new respect at his courage to leave his own guards stationed outside, but he did wonder how the two leaders would converse, since they did not know each others' languages. Jankor assured Gelbar that at the first sign of a lack of communication, his assistance would be called for.

The tent into which he stepped was distinctly different from the one where he had met Maraden the previous night. Small, close and hot, it was decorated simply in neutral colors. The stone sculpture near the entrance, hand carved in Saraptan style and with a wavering low flame, caught Kirk's immediate attention. So different, yet so subtly like Spock's Enterprise firepot....

The lone occupant of the tent lay reclining on a low bed. A raised hand beckoned his visitor to approach. Preparing himself, attempting to control his wildly fluctuating emotions, Kirk moved close and seated himself cross-legged on a cushion beside the bed.

Maraden lay back against his pillows, looking pale and weak from the previous night's experience. Yet he had survived the assassination attempt, probably due to the alien nature of his physiology. A native to the planet would doubtless have been killed by the assassin's poison. Kirk suddenly felt like an intruder and nearly averted his eyes from the man's obvious state of deshability. He wore a thin, wine-colored, full length tunic with billowing, open-weave sleeves; the tunic's lacings were undone to the waist. Kirk did not look away, though. The dark, hypnotic eyes held his in a painfully appraising gaze.

Maraden spoke first, beginning what appeared to be the start of a long dissertation in Saraptan. Kirk tore his eyes away and affected an attitude of annoyance. The speaker stopped.

Kirk turned back to regard him. "English, Spock. You do remember English."

A reaction finally flared in the black eyes then. Kirk saw the convulsive swallow that preceeded the Vulcan's answer.

Speaking slowly now, as if seeking long forgotten words, he asked, "From where have you come?"

Kirk almost sobbed in relief. He wanted to reach out then to Spock, but held himself in check. Distrust and confusion now reflected back at him from the soulless dark eyes, but no welcome yet, no comprehension.

The Human chose his words carefully, "I... have been looking for you for a long time. So long -- I feared you dead. I never realized..."

"Who sent you?" There was a note of suspicion in the deep voice.

"Sent me?" Kirk did not understand. "Spock, I got here the same way you did." He hesitated, saw no emotion in the impassive eyes. "Don't you remember? Spock, the Klingons..."

The stranger looked away for a moment, but Kirk was certain he had gone a shade paler at the mention of the Klingon terrorists. He pressed on. "They had us, Spock. They hurt us very badly. They must have left us here -- "

"I remember." The face was still averted, the voice cold.

"We got separated, I suppose." Kirk's words were hushed; he tried to temper the desperation he felt with gentleness. "I tried, tried so hard to find you..."

The Vulcan spoke as if unaware that Kirk had continued. "I remember. The pain, the drugs. My mind -- cut up into little pieces." He shuddered, pulled the edges of his tunic together across his chest as if chilled. "Wandering, sick, everything changed." He paused again, swallowed and when he next spoke, the emotion that had crept in was now absent from his voice. "And they killed my Captain."

Kirk went cold inside, his chest felt so constricted he could scarcely breathe. His stomach hurt and he tried to forcibly relax before speaking, to stop the wild thoughts that spun through his mind. *Selective amnesia? Insanity?* His thoughts were reeling, and with all his heart he wanted to shout out the question that had plagued him for years, that even now was no closer to being answered: *Those damn Klingon bastards -- Spock, what did they do to you?*

Kirk's voice sounded choked when he finally made himself speak. "No. They didn't." It was all he could manage and he waited for some reaction from the figure on the bed. When there was none, he moved closer, kneeling beside the low mattress. "Spock," he begged, "look at me. Please."

Slowly the dark head turned. The eyes held even more confusion now, and a trace of apprehension.

"Don't you know me, Spock? Don't you remember?"

"I remember agony..." The words were drawn out painfully, the pauses between them seemingly endless. "And death. The Klingons destroyed... everything. Life... love... they took the stars... away." His chest was heaving, his eyes wide and reflecting horror undimmed by the passage of time. Kirk wanted him to stop, but the Vulcan kept on relentlessly. "My... Captain? Dead... and I, too... They destroyed us both."

"No, Spock." Kirk finally touched him, clasping both the Vulcan's hands in his. "They didn't. I made it. Just like you. And it's all right now. We finally found each other." His words rushed out in a frantic need to reassure the trembling Vulcan and a desperate attempt to draw them back together, find what they once had. "Ten years, it's not forever. Here, it's like we've hardly aged. We've gone through a lot, I know -- but we can make it. If we -- "

Spock suddenly threw off the Human hands holding him and jumped up from the bed. "No!"

The unexpected movement and the warning shout shocked Kirk; he too stood and unconsciously backed up a step.

"No!" Spock shouted it again, then his voice dropped to an ominous quiet. "Dead. Everything inside me -- my life, my Captain." He turned from Kirk and the Human made one more attempt to reach him.

"Spock, the Klingons didn't kill..." He started to say 'me' but changed his inflection mid-sentence. "They didn't kill Captain Kirk. Just look. Just try to remember."

The Vulcan turned back slowly, his expression torn, reaching with his eyes, wanting to see Kirk and yet, still held back by something unspeakable, unable to fully comprehend. "The Klingons..."

"They didn't kill me."

For a moment it seemed, Spock wavered. He paused on the edge of acceptance, then his eyes hardened once again and in a voice full of contempt, he ordered Kirk, "Get out."

"Spock -- "

Maraden shouted for his guards. They entered and Kirk was ushered unceremoniously out of the tent. He watched Spock as he went, seeing him as a pathetic, insane shadow of the man he once had been and couldn't help calling out one more time.

"They didn't kill me, Spock!"

Behind the closed tent flap, he didn't see the figure sag onto the bed, or hear the ragged voice whisper, "No, the Klingons didn't kill Jim. But I did."

Three

First Seer Maraden spent the remainder of the day sequestered inside his sleeping tent. He refused all food and drink, even Gelbar's calming potions. The chief priest knew his people were accustomed to his occasional fits of strange, alien behavior, and they willingly left him alone to commune with the gods, to meditate or simply to rest whenever he required.

Alien... Maraden sometimes nearly forgot his alienness among the devoted followers who accepted him so readily. He forgot it, or simply used it as the reason he was now chief priest. He had become the bridge between living Saraptans and the gods. His people could see the physical differences between themselves and Maraden, and they believed in his divinity, his link with the otherworld.

Conscious memory went back only so far. As he pushed farther and farther back into what was his past, the images grew dimmer and less real. Somewhere, beyond a barrier of unspeakable pain and torment, lay memories of a life of fulfillment and peace, lit by the glow of stars. He dared not breach the wall, however, for the pain that separated the halves of his existence was too real, too deathly.

But he knew. The memories were not lost, merely locked away from his true heart and mind, from the face he presented to the world. He had put the pain behind him and now, as it resurfaced, images of what he had lost rose up to taunt him.

He had loved the life of which he had been deprived more than he had known. Only when it was gone did he recognize what he had had. Between what once was and what he had now become, there was the barrier of pain, a wall that, due to his current, troubling state of mind, began to crumble under the weight of needing to find and recapture the past.

He tried to meditate, to focus on less troubling thoughts. Yet even the present became a jumble and dissolved to remembrances of his early years among the Sarapta. Hurt, broken and defeated, he had been discovered by a band of youths. They had carried him to their small village, cared for him as they would a wounded animal. He had been a hurt, wild thing to them, a confused, tortured alien even to himself.

Gradually, he had regained enough awareness to realize that this was a society that believed the strong should survive and that the weak needed to be winnowed out. He was largely ignored, often mistreated in the village and due to his injuries, unable to comprehend their customs and reasoning.

Mentally, he was barely able to function. He knew only that he hurt and continued hurting. He was aware of his being lost, deprived, but his thoughts were incoherent, his memories twisted. When the band of Sarapta that had found him moved on, he was left in the abandoned village. Yet he had not simply languished there. He had long periods of mental black-out, but would regain awareness to find himself drinking water, consuming food. Some inner compulsion, set apart from intellectual decision, kept him alive.

He became a wanderer, disappearing for months into the desert lands. They were familiar to him, recalling primal memories, a heritage that seemed unreachable now. Yet the memories invoked by the hot desert sands were less painful than those of his immediate past. He let the heat and the solitude nurture him.

There, in the desert, the wall his psyche needed to keep the agony he could not quite recall, yet would have died remembering, was built strong. Instinct for self-preservation took over where logic and emotion refused to function. He knew, deep down in an unvoiced

region of his consciousness, that he had lost what had meant more to him than anything in the universe. His friend was gone, he was alone. James Kirk died in his heart as he must surely have died at the Klingons' hands. The guilt, the memories, were so formidable that knowledge of that death, somehow even of that life, was driven from the wanderer's mind.

His mind had healed, though, gradually, the gaping wounds scabbed over, the memories readjusted to conform with an unacceptable reality. The loss, the death of one he could not bear to lose was too painful. Maraden did not remember, did not now see and understand, but the Vulcan Spock had been too battered, too weakened to survive under the terrible onslaught. He lived, though not as the being he had once been. A new, changed person emerged from his desert wanderings, crippled, incomplete, yet functional.

He had met the Seer Tisel, the old, wisened Sarapta leader who had helped him, first with learning the language of the land in which he lived, and later supplied the ever-inquiring mind with the intellectual studies of the Sarapta.

Maraden, Tisel called him, *One Who Learns*. The intelligence of his mind was unharmed, only the personality had been reshaped. Maraden took to his studies as a convalescent takes to exercise; using his mind was therapy.

Still, he suffered from constant headaches, frequent terrible nightmares. The Seer prescribed potions that helped ease the pain and interpreted for Maraden the few fragmented images he was able to recall from the dreams. Maraden learned from him not only how to interpret dreams, but how they held a place in the religious doctrine of the Sarapta.

Soon Maraden was apprenticed to the old Seer. He counceled those who were troubled, interpreted signs from the gods. Tisel had at first been fond of the stranger he had taken in, but later grew jealous of his abilities, annoyed that Maraden seemed so unemotional and distant. There was no closeness between them. Maraden remained unapproachable, set apart in a way even Tisel, descended from descendants of gods, could not equal.

The people seemed to sense this aura in Maraden, to accept the differences in his appearance and manner as the touch of the gods upon him. Surely, he knew things of the forces of man and nature that only one with extraordinary gifts could comprehend.

Maraden found the Sarapta strangely familiar, yet far removed from his actual way of life. Maraden could not quite remember, yet the tradition-bound, warlike people touched a buried chord within his hidden soul. They were passionate, ready to do battle rather than seek peace, yet they understood logic as well, and held dear the values of truth and justice.

Tisel's jealousy of Maraden's abilities drove him to work too hard for a man of his advanced years. He fell ill with a desperate malady even captive Atholian doctors could not cure. He lived, he could think, yet he could not speak or move his twisted body. It was spring, the people needed to know his words concerning the planting. Maraden went to Tisel, touched him, communicating with him in a way he had all but forgotten he had possessed.

How can this thought-speaking be, my son?

Our minds have become as one, Tisel.

You are indeed not of this world. Forgive me, Seer Maraden. I bow to your capabilities...

The people, too, saw the act as divine communication. When Tisel died, Maraden was made First Seer. The gods had blessed them, and in turn, all the Sarapta turned to their spiritual leader for guidance, even in their political struggles.

To lead, to take command... It was not an office he would have sought, yet once it was thrust upon him, Maraden took the position seriously. He could not return emotion to the passionate people who believed in him, yet he could bring them the concepts of peace and logic. Their devotion was so complete, Maraden came to believe also that he was sent to help these people. He could recall no other reason for his existence. While the Sarapta agreed in principle with the ideals of peace and brotherhood, of liberty for all and not just citizens of Sarapta, in practice they demanded war and were fiercely determined to win back the lands stolen from them by Atholos in antiquity. Maraden continued to teach of peace, to convert his people to the ways of logic.

As First Seer, he remained alone, set apart, revered yet not understood, supported though without friends. Maraden did not seek solace or companionship, however. Somehow he understood that doing so had once, in the dim, regretted past, caused him pain, pain which even now continued to haunt his days. The Seer remembered all too well the Priestess Siol who had once shown him compassion. They had shared a spiritual friendship for a time. Yet, inexplicably, the moment had come when Maraden had been driven to possess her. That act had resulted in the priestess' death; she lay buried now in sacred ground. The Seer could barely recall the horrible incident, and he had never understood what had caused the fire that burned within him nor why she had died. Alone again, he regretted the loss of Siol bitterly. He had come to accept his isolation and loneliness as part of the price of survival.

Survival -- how often and how bitterly he had wished for death, especially in those early years. Now, he had become hardened to living. At least more and more Sarapta accepted his values and honored his wish to avoid conflict with Atholos. Still, others disagreed with him and wished him dead because of his doctrine of peace. Perhaps they would one day succeed in bringing about his destruction.

The termination of his life did not particularly worry him, although he did hope, illogically, that it would not come until a greater measure of peace was assured. Perhaps he should have continued his meeting with the Atholos *vadir*. All at once, the reason he had ordered the *vadir* to leave became cloudy in his mind. Maraden found he was unclear as to what had upset him, when moments ago, he had thought it all so obvious. Perplexed, he realized that if he had just given the meeting a chance, they could have possibly reached an agreement.

He felt a need to speak again with the *vadir*, a strange sense of being drawn to the man that persisted even though he had, in his ill-defined anger, blotted the image of his face from his mind. He shuddered involuntarily again, feeling smothered, confined by the heavy atmosphere of the tent. He needed to get out, to clear his mind of the burdensome pain that seemed to be pervading all his thoughts.

Scarcely pausing to think of the danger in which he might be placing himself by going out alone, without his guards, Maraden opened a chest containing his traveling clothes. He did opt to forego his well-known black cloak, choosing instead a plain brown riding robe that would help conceal his identity. Strapping his knee boots and hefting the short sword he habitually wore at his waist, he stepped cautiously from the tent. He moved quietly toward the tethered horses and selected a mount from among those of his guards rather than his own beast. Within moments, his stealthy departure was accomplished.

Maraden knew the land well. His memory for details was still intact, and he rode easily, following the route the *vadir* and his party had taken that morning back toward the Atholian border. They had nearly a day's head start, but he knew the terrain better than they. One rider traveling alone could make better time than a group moving with a supply wagon.

It was night when he caught up to the *vadir's* party. They had made camp in a small clearing and he could make out the forms of the guards dozing by the fire.

His eyes sought the figure of Jankor. The *vadir* lay a slight distance away from the rest, but his face was lit by the flickering flames. They cast a warm light on his bronzed features. The Seer found himself staring, feeling emotions he had unconsciously repressed for years.

The *vadir's* words this morning came back to him, the familiar way he used Maraden's old-name, the intimate manner in which he approached and touched. The Sarapta closed his eyes, attempting once again to strengthen the barrier, to ignore the knowledge that seemed to come into his mind with a rush.

Those eyes, wide with feeling, with need... that voice, soft and strong and... No, it was some trick of the subconscious. He knew that insanity was always at his side, always just beneath the surface of his personality. This man only reminded him of... of the friend who had been dead so many years, who had had to die in Spock's mind when the Vulcan found he would never know Kirk's true fate. He died... and I lived... The insidious whisper taunted, the words falling just out of reach of Maraden's comprehension. A familiar, nameless guilt, an undefined grief rose up to squeeze at the Sarapta's buried heart.

As he stood staring, the figure under his gaze stirred. He was not asleep after all, but awake among his dozing guards. The watcher's lips curved in an unconscious smile, his aching spirits lifting for an instant.

Their eyes met. There was little surprise in the *vadir's* expression. He simply rose in one silent motion, pulling the deep green cape he lay upon around his shoulders and came forward to greet his somber night visitor.

The dark stranger stepped back self-consciously at his approach. His trepidation must have shown in his eyes, for the *vadir* reached out as if to touch him. He hesitated, but the incomplete gesture served to halt Maraden's half-formed desire to leave.

The silence between them stretched out another few seconds before the Human spoke. "You followed me. I'm glad."

Again the long-forgotten language. Maraden wanted to turn off his memory, to erect the barrier of grief, turn on the emotions of guilt and anger once again, but something stopped him. The insanity seemed held at bay by the power of the hazel eyes meeting his in a welcoming, tender gaze. Yet he could not speak. Transfixed, he listened to the other's next words.

"You do know me, don't you, Spock? Even if you can't say it, or admit it inside, you do remember."

Maraden backed up a step, fearing this was all a dream, needing it to be unreal. "No... "

"Yes." The voice was so calm, so confident. "That's why you came. There's still something here between us. Some link that was never destroyed, though neither of us felt its presence before."

The Sarapta's throat constricted, he felt a panicky sensation. "Link... ?"

"We tried to meld that last night, remember?" The speaker advanced slowly. "And we thought it didn't work."

Maraden shook his head in mute protest, squeezing his eyes shut.

"But something must have happened, some thread of our minds must have met and held, in spite of all the pain."

At the word *pain*, Spock sagged at the knees, dropping to the ground. He opened his eyes to find himself face to face with one whose existence he had buried ten years before. The Human's hands reached out, but Spock saw it all in slow motion, slanted, as the present gave way and an explosion of memory broke within his mind.

The hands touched him, held him supportively, but he felt them as a burning invasion. He writhed, twisting, convulsing on the ground. Dimly, he heard shouts, approaching footsteps, then all dissolved in the chaos of insanity.



There was early grey light in the sky as his eyes opened and focused. He was warmly comfortable now, and calm. Raising his head slightly, he could see he'd been carried to the camp and lain by the fire. His cries must have awakened the guards. He wondered where the *vadir* -- where Kirk was, and a tenseness suffused his body. He turned his head in sudden distress.

"Easy." A soft word, a hand gripping his shoulder securely. A cup was held to his lips and the Vulcan sipped.

"Better now?"

Spock let his eyes travel to the face beside him. "Atholian wine is bitter."

Kirk frowned. "Perhaps. But it gives strength." He hesitated a moment, then sighed, setting down the cup. "The truth is bitter too, sometimes, but accepting it can also strengthen one."

The Vulcan sat up, his fluid movement belying the ache throbbing at the back of his skull. On the periphery of his vision, he could see the guards come to attention. He pressed his eyes shut, but the barrier was down now, his whole life laid out against the dawning light in stark relief. The insane reaction earlier had decimated his reserves of denial; now he could see again, not only all they had been before and been together, but what had formed and necessitated the barrier itself -- the way they had lost it all.

He'd seen again the way he'd been that last night, half-mad from the Klingon torture already, desperate and irrational, yet frantic to retain any scrap of logic. And afraid; he was crazed with worry that the Klingons would kill Kirk. The Human was bone-weary, pale and thin. Spock had noted the way his hands trembled, the way he moved as if in constant pain. The spirit still stood firm, but the body was gradually weakening. Spock had wanted desperately to ease Kirk's vulnerability, to protect him, but he himself had been almost to the point of collapse. They had tried to meld -- Spock remembered the terrible backlash of pain that had prevented the link he wanted to make, needed to have. The next thing he'd known, he'd been torn from Kirk's arms by the brutal guards, dragged into a state of shivering terror and strapped to the machine that would tear out the last remaining bits of his sanity.

They had waited, going slowly, prolonging the exquisite agony that had become his way of life, teasing him, mocking him with offers of the release of death, dragging out his wait for the expected pain. On a viewscreen, he could see the horror being enacted upon the person of his Captain: Kirk's naked body, beaten and bloody, convulsing under the torment of their fiendish devices.

Spock had been dimly aware of his own voice, hoarse from repeated cries, yet the sound that caught his attention most was the inhuman wail torn from the Captain's throat. The Klingons wouldn't stop hurting him, they were killing... killing... killing them both...

But Spock had awakened on this unknown primitive world. He had no idea how he'd gotten here, whether this was further torture invented by the Klingons or punishment devised by the Federation for military secrets he may have divulged under mind-probe. He was never to know, or much care, and his ravaged mind could not sort out reality from hallucination. Kirk was gone, all Spock had left was the recurring nightmare of his Captain's re-enacted agony, a scene so real in his mind that he never questioned whether it had actually happened or not.

His fate, apparently, was survival. Kirk was gone, Spock left behind on the ragged edge of near-insanity. His weary mind had sealed off the memory of Kirk's very existence then, the only way Spock could tolerate living. What had emerged was Maraden.

Yet, here was incontrovertible proof that he had been wrong, had been mad. If he'd retained any trace of sanity or loyalty, he would have let himself die, too. To face Kirk now would be to admit that he had given him up for dead, killed him with his mind as surely as if he had done the physical deed and buried the body. Spock went cold and sick with revulsion.

He began trembling and his stomach cramped with sudden nausea. He fumbled awkwardly with the covers that had been drawn over him and crawled in jerky movements to the edge of the camp where, with painful heaves, his stomach rejected what little he'd consumed the previous day.

As the cramping eased, he became aware of the hands firmly supporting his shoulders. He tried to twist away as humiliation added itself to the jumble of his emotions, but Kirk would not be deterred. The Human wiped his face with a cool, wet cloth. When Spock finally met his eyes, the look of compassion and concern in them made him want to weep.

"I wish you'd talk to me." Kirk's voice was cajoling, gentle, as if he thought conversation might do the Vulcan good, as if he, too, desired it. When Spock didn't answer, Kirk sighed and his tone became more brusque. "If you can't talk about us, about the past, there's still the small matter of that war we'd both like to avert. Remember?"

Spock blinked in surprise, but grasped at the out Kirk offered. "My people are slow in accepting the message of peace. I will do what I can. Will you prevent an aggression against us?"

Kirk became *vadir* again for a moment. "Aggression against you? The Sarapta are the ones trying to take our land. We're simply defending what is ours. We won't invade Sarapta unless you make it necessary."

"That land is Saraptan. We shall recapture what is rightfully ours."

"Yours?" Kirk silenced him with a pleading look. "You talk like you really believe that, like you really have become one of them. Don't you remember what you once were?"

"It was you who suggested the topic of our respective positions," Spock fought to keep the anguish out of his voice. He looked closely at the man before him, his face, his clothing. "You also seem to have adopted the customs and beliefs of a new land,"

The Human ignored the comment. "I've always found that differences can be settled through compromise."

"Compromise usually most benefits the side who offers it." Spock trembled deep within, the newly released spirit trying to hide behind the transfigured persona of Maraden.

"You used to be a man of peace." Kirk seemed determined to remind him of the past.

"It is not logical," Spock nearly hesitated, the word conjuring old memories, "to attempt peaceful co-existence with a nation, like Atholos, who would steal valuable property."

Kirk tried one last time to address the stranger as he remembered him. "If we can't settle this in peace, we're going to have a war on our hands. That's going to mean you against me. Are you prepared for that, Spock?"

The Vulcan let the desperation in Kirk's voice blind him to the needs he wished he could face. " 'Spock'. The name is meaningless. I am no longer your Spock. I am Maraden of Sarapta. And you are Jankor, *vadir* of Atholos." He managed to get to his feet and walked to where his robe had fallen. Throwing it around his shoulders, he turned. "We have had our peace conference. I shall report to my people."

He signalled to his horse; when the animal approached, he mounted.

Kirk grabbed at the bridle. "You can't face me, can you?"

"I will continue to attempt to lead my people to peace." Spock couldn't respond to the question, though he suspected his failure to do so was answer enough. He nudged his horse. It reared and Kirk was forced to let go the reins.

"I'll be waiting!" The Human's voice was defiant as horse and rider bounded away.



As Spock neared his own village, he attempted to put on the face and persona of Maraden once more. It was difficult; his identity had slipped, become confused. As much as he tried to blot out the image of Kirk's face, it remained in his mind, the words he'd shouted mocking. 'You can't face me.' It was true and Kirk realized its truth, saw how the guilt-ridden, mentally crippled Vulcan was incapable of admitting the fact of what he had done. He had denied Kirk's very existence and managed to go on living without him instead of letting himself die. The image of Kirk in torment had been too great to bear; it should have killed him, would have if he had had the sanity to let it. But Spock had lived and made a mockery of every promise he had ever given Kirk.



'I'll be waiting,' Kirk had called after him. *Waiting... You were waiting for me all these years, Captain, and I never came. Impossible to believe I could have so easily betrayed your trust... impossible but imperative to believe. Facts must be faced, the sooner the better. I am a betrayer, a destroyer of everything held dear. Wait for me if you will, Kirk, I can never return.*

Spock wanted to weep, but he couldn't, would not allow himself that luxury. He might long to go to Kirk, to pour out apologies and promises and be accepted, but knew he could not. Kirk deserved more honesty than that; he should not be expected to support a betrayer in his actions. Just as Spock had to face the truth, so should Kirk. The past was gone to them now, irrevocably destroyed, irretrievably lost. He was Maraden now, Kirk was Jankor. Their paths had diverged, new destinies setting them against one another.

"My lord?" Spock was startled out of his reverie by Gelbar's voice. He pulled himself into the cocoon provided by his alter ego and, as Maraden, dismounted.

"I have met with the *vadir*. He has pledged not to invade Sarapta unless provoked by aggressive action on our part."

Gelbar met his eyes. "Do you believe him?"

Maraden hesitated only a moment before answering. "No. And he is not certain he can believe me."



Later that day, Maraden met with the leaders of the Sarapta army. He heard them out, those who understood the concept of peace he tried to teach, and those who believed they could not allow the Atholos to remain on the land that had been Saraptan.

"I have attempted to negotiate with the Atholós *vadir*," he stated at last.

"Nothing can be accomplished by negotiations, Lord Maraden," It was Nordos, foremost advocate of invasion.

"Lives can be saved," Maraden insisted.

"The lives of soldiers are dedicated to Sarapta. They are willing to die for our cause,"

Maraden eyed Nordos and the others levelly. "If I could be sure that within Sarapta there would be peace, that my people would be content having the old lands back in their possession, I could condone the soldiers' sacrifice."

"If we do not attack and take back what is ours, the Atholos will see us as weaklings, as children. They will not only keep the ancient land, but invade and steal more of Sarapta for themselves." This time Arbaran, an old, grizzled chief spoke up.

"Yes," the young Cador nodded. "And a people are only made weak by the weakness of their leader."

Maraden met the insolent youth's eyes. "Do you believe the way of peace proves weakness?"

"The fear of fighting does," came the defiant answer.

"There have been attempts on your life, my lord." Nordos spoke again.

"They are unsuccessful."

"True. But perhaps they were warnings. If your followers lose faith, the threats may prove fatal."

Maraden was silent for a moment. "We must be true to ourselves, to our ancestors. Peace can be maintained within the rightful lands of Sarapta."

"You favor war then?" Nordos was eager.

"I must seek the counsel of the gods."

Young Cador frowned, exchanging a look with Arbaran.

"You disagree with tradition?" Maraden's eyes froze the two.

The moment stretched out, neither man replied.

"We await their blessing and your word, my lord." The speaker was Tulvar, one who had favored peace from the beginning.

Maraden continued to glare at Cador and Arbaran. At last the defiance went out of their eyes. Arbaran bowed his head, remaining silent. Cador bowed as well, murmuring the traditional apology, "To your will and that of the gods, I bend."

Maraden dismissed his men. The aggression against Atholos would continue. He had no choice, it seemed. His people would never accept the doctrine of peace from a leader they thought too weak to fight. And he could not make peace with the *vadir*. Once betrayed, a trust could not be rebuilt.

The war was inevitable. Yet Spock needed to meditate, to seek the best, least costly way to proceed. He must find the way to spare lives. He must preserve his soldiers from sacrificing themselves to the cause, thus proving to them that peace was the way. There was no other reason to wait. Maraden had convinced himself of that. He could not protect a life which he could no longer even admit held importance to him.

Four

Spock waited for nearly a week, listening to the reports of his intelligence men. They told that though the Sarapta were taking no aggressive action, they seemed to be secretly mobilizing their forces. Kirk realized bitterly that he might just have to wage a full-scale war against the people led by Spock.

Their last meeting plagued his dreams and his waking hours as well. Kirk had at first thought that discovering Maraden's true identity would put the conflict in a different light. Though each leader believed in the cause of his own people, they had, after all, worked together and both understood the other's principles and ideals. It would seem, Kirk thought, that a peaceful solution could be possible. However, Spock continued to interpret the situation through Maraden's eyes, forcing Kirk to remain, as the Atholos *vadir*, his adversary.

Kirk had gone over and over every word that had been spoken between them, every gesture, every nuance of expression. Spock was torn, at war with himself as much as with Atholos. His violent reaction as Kirk mentioned the word 'pain' had been shocking, revealing the depths of the Vulcan's anguish.

Spock had thrashed on the ground, moaning, helpless, insensible to all efforts to comfort or call him back from whatever had hold of his mind. He'd muttered words, phrases that had showed Kirk the tumult within his mind. "I see... I feel... I remember..." Spock had cried out brokenly.

Had he actually forgotten everything until that very moment? It was possible that the memories might have been locked so tightly away that the force of remembering could have

caused his collapse, Kirk realized. And after, when he had finally calmed and had fallen into that deep slumber from which he did not awaken until dawn, Spock had again manifested a catastrophic reaction. Kirk had no idea what had been going through the Vulcan's mind as he spoke to him about accepting the truth, yet the thin face had reflected such pain and torment as Kirk only saw it expressed in his own worst nightmares.

Kirk had become certain the Vulcan did remember him, yet was continuing to behave as if he did not. The conflict in the dark eyes was enough to convince Kirk of the pain Spock's actions were costing the Vulcan, though his attitude was no easier to explain or understand.

Kirk had never thought the Vulcan would forget the rapport they shared, and had always believed that friendship was strong enough to carry them through anything. Now, he had to face the fact that he could not reach Spock, could not communicate with him on even the most shallow of levels. The memory of their caring for one another had remained untarnished through all the lonely years Kirk had spent in Atholos; it hurt now to see his dreams crushed, to see Spock so changed, so distant and yet still so scarred.

So changed... he did indeed seem not to be the Spock who had been Kirk's First Officer and friend. The Klingon torture had damaged his mind and spirit, and only a partial healing had occurred here in this primitive, strangely cruel land.

Kirk didn't want to confront the possibility that Spock was truly mad. The Vulcan did not remember their past; it must only be that it was too painful for him to face. Yet, if a madman led the Sarapta, Kirk knew he dare not take the threat of war too lightly. Trying to sort out the intricacies of the situation, Kirk thought of McCoy, not only as a beloved friend, but also as the doctor who could help the troubled Vulcan.

I hope you're happy, Bones, Kirk thought, his heart heavy and miserable; *I know you searched for us long and hard. I know it was a long time before you gave up. Just have a good life and live to a ripe old age with your modern conveniences. Sometimes I miss them ... and you...*

Images of the Enterprise rose up to torment him, the ship whose fate he'd never know. He'd never command her again, never even know who now sat at her helm. If anything had happened to destroy her after he was gone...

Kirk threw himself into his duties as *vadir*, let himself become more responsive than usual to Theedra's attentions, anything to keep his mind from the melancholia that threatened. He sat up nights going over his maps and reports, plotting tactics and possible battle diagrams, lecturing his men on procedure. They sat, enthralled by his lessons, soaking up his futuristic expertise. Kirk had once thought that if war was what Sarapta wanted, he'd give them a fight they weren't ready to wage. Now, a formidable enemy sat opposing him, one with as much knowledge and experience in the ways of war as he. *At least,* he mused, *that makes the contest more equal. Like Tyree's world, equal contest, status quo.*

Days had passed, and still nothing happened along the border. Jankor decided to ride out with a contingent of foot soldiers to a new camp he had established overlooking the Sarapta valley stronghold, along the high ridge of the border of the Phelosius territory.

Because of his agitation, Jankor kept the men moving all night and arrived at the camp just at dawn. The outpost was in chaos, an early raid by Sarapta forces in full swing.

So this is it, Spock, Kirk thought grimly as he entered the battle. *You're finally forcing my hand.*

The attack had been by stealth and the Atholian forces totally taken by surprise. The fortuitous arrival of Jankor and the additional soldiers, however, turned the tide in their favor and with a minimum of casualties, they repulsed the attack.

Jankor was wounded, having taken a lance in the shoulder, and lay bandaged and bed-ridden at the outpost, as angry at his own carelessness as at Spock for having begun open war. *No, not Spock,* he amended, *Maraden.*



Spock was deep in meditation in his private tent when the disturbance outside broke into his consciousness. He pulled his mind inward and rose, going to the doorway.

A number of horsemen had just ridden into the village. He spotted Cador whooping in evident pleasure. At the young warrior's side rode Arbaran, looking grim but self-contained.

Maraden strode forward and the crowd silenced at his approach. Cador dismounted and knelt before him. Arbaran remained astride his horse.

"Speak," Maraden commanded the kneeling figure.

Cador looked up, his eyes aglow. "My lord, we have a victory for you!"

"Cador!" The younger man fell silent at Arbaran's order.

Spock looked up at the rider, his eyes demanding an explanation.

"Not a victory, my lord," the old chief stated calmly. "But the Atholos know we are ready for them now."

"You will explain."

"The new outpost they built just at the border of our land, my lord," offered Cador. "It was an effrontery, a mockery. They dared us to attempt to take it."

"They dared *you*." Spock's mind was burning in slow anger. "I gave no orders regarding the outbreak of hostilities."

"Should we wait until the peaceful gods deem all is in readiness for us to be conquered?" There was little insolence in Arbaran's tone, but Spock pinned him with an icy glare. Paling, the man dismounted.

"We attacked them at dawn, my lord."

"You shall be punished for your insurrection, Arbaran, Cador," Maraden pronounced, "after I learn of the circumstances fully. Tell me."

"They were totally surprised, my lord." Cador sounded eager and pleased.

"And yet?" The Seer was certain all had not gone well.

"More soldiers were on the way. It was happenstance -- they could not have known we were attacking."

"Of course not. You had not been ordered to, thus the Atholian spies could not suspect."

Arbaran and Cador both appeared to relax. "That is why we attempted it, my lord," the older man explained. "We meant no insurrection."

"But you lost. How many men?"

"Less than one hundred," Cador sounded defensive. "Besides..."

"Yes, Cador." Maraden turned to him. "You have some special news to relate, I can see. What is the victory of which you spoke? What victory can there be in the needless death of one hundred men?"

"He fell under my lance, my lord." The voice was throaty with pride. "We have truly dealt your enemy a blow."

"He?" Spock felt a sudden chill clutch at his insides.

"The *vadir* himself. He rode in with the foot soldiers."

Spock's mind went reeling. His eyes bulged and, as he advanced on Cador, he exuded a rage that caused the crowd to gasp. He reached out, taking the man in an electrifying grip, forcing the surprised warrior to his knees. "Is he dead?" he hissed.

Cador shook his head, obviously shocked by Maraden's anger. "I... I don't know."

Spock's voice sank to dreadful seriousness. "You have angered me for the final time, Cador." His hands moved swiftly; Cador's struggle was brief. As the limp body dropped to the dust, the Vulcan whirled on the assembled population. He met every pair of eyes with an intense glare, and none dared speak.

He pinned Arbaran with a look. "Get my horse."

The old man scrambled to obey.



Night had closed in on the quiet outpost. Kirk was roused by the sound of approaching hoofbeats. He was struggling to a sitting position in his bed as a guard entered.

"A visitor, *vadir*," the man responded to the question in Jankor's eyes. "The priest, Maraden, riding alone it seems."

Kirk considered, nearly telling the guard he refused to see Maraden. Then he hesitated, wondering why Spock had dared travel all the way here alone to see him, whether the act indicated a possible change of heart. Kirk doubted it. This visit following so closely on the surprise attack was just one more indication of Maraden's madness. Still, he told his guard that he would meet with the Seer.

Before admitting him, however, Jankor saw to it that his guard helped him to a seat in one of the tent's low chairs and that he was fortified with a draught of the strengthening Atholian wine.



Waiting outside, Spock appeared much more calm than when he had ridden out of his village. His most pressing need had been to learn whether Kirk still lived. Upon hearing that the *vadir* had received only a shoulder wound, the panic that had twisted his insides and thrown him into a killing rage subsided and he was able to draw upon the old crutches of Vulcan non-emotionalism and his current attitude of priestly reverence to seem unperturbed as he stood by the *vadir's* tent, rationalizing that he simply wished to assure Jankor that he had not ordered the morning attack.

Still, it was ultimately his responsibility. Kirk had been wounded at the hands of one of Maraden's people. The seer felt himself growing more concerned as the wait to be admitted stretched out. He could remain impervious toward Kirk from a distance. At the moment, however, he felt as badly as if he himself had pierced Kirk's flesh with the lance.

When the aide finally announced him, Spock's nerves were frayed and his emotions remained confused. Yet his mask of stoicism firmly in place, he stepped boldly into Kirk's domain.

The *vadir* sat beside a low table looking much better than Maraden had expected he would. He did not rise to greet his visitor, but indicated he take a chair opposite his own.

The Vulcan was struck by the coolness of the tent, so unlike the hot, close atmosphere of the ones in which he lived. The fabric forming it was light, airy, keeping its Human occupant comfortable in the heat of the day, or cool of the evening. Spock noticed the many variations in color, ranging from deep forest greens up through lighter shades and on to sparkling blues. *So earthlike, he mused, so familiar.*

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" The sarcastic tone was surprising, throwing Spock's emotions into further turmoil. Kirk had seemed pleased to see him on the last occasion.

"I..." He faltered, gazing into eyes that seemed hard and cold. *The way one would regard a betrayer.* He straightened. "When we last spoke, we left with the understanding that hostilities would not be opened -- "

"I didn't really believe you meant that." Kirk spat out the words. "You fit right in with the Sarapta, don't you? The barbarism wasn't totally weaned out of your race, was it, Spock?"

"My people are not fully in favor of peace. All do not accept the doctrine. They believe you have taken their land."

"Your land, Maraden. *My* people are sitting here on *your* land. And we intend to keep it."

"I did not order the raid on this outpost." Spock said the words contemptuously, wondering why he had felt he owed this man an explanation. His fear for Kirk's life had taken over; now face to face with Jankor, he was reminded that *he* was Maraden, that they were enemies.

"Really?" Jankor's tone was almost snide, disbelieving.

"It was done in direct opposition to my wishes."

"Are you sure about that?"

Under the unforgiving glare, Spock found concentrating difficult. "What? I don't know what you mean."

"Are you sure you didn't order the raid? I think you're so crazy you could have forgotten doing it."

Spock rose from the chair, needing to put some distance between himself and Kirk. The rage he'd felt earlier rose up in him again, changed direction. Toward Kirk he felt anger, toward himself, loathing. Kirk had lived all these years, quite unaware of Spock's own torment. And here was Spock, trying to explain, looking for understanding. They'd gone too far apart to ever find that kind of understanding again. Spock had killed at the thought of harm coming to Kirk, now the action made him feel ridiculous, bitter. The memories he had tried to excise had caused that deadly reaction, not the present in which they now lived. Kirk had been dead to him; both their lives would be simpler if they no longer knew each other.

"You're insane, Spock." The Human's voice was unrelenting. "You don't know what you're doing half the time, I'm sure."

There was movement behind him; Kirk had risen from his seat and was coming toward Spock. Without turning, the Vulcan spoke, his voice dangerously low. "Then beware. If you seek to deal with a madman, you will be taking dangerous chances."

He turned. Kirk stood three feet away from him, trembling and pale. The turbulence of the Human's emotions, so at variance from his words, hit Spock with surprising force. He found he was still incredibly empathetic where this man was concerned and the feeling frightened him.

Kirk swayed, going even paler. Just as he toppled, Spock reached out and the Human sagged into his arms.

"Jim!"



Kirk's eyes fluttered, their coldness replaced with warmth and relief. Then he went limp, losing consciousness completely.

Spock carried him to the bed and checked the bandaged shoulder. The bleeding had started again. Moving almost without conscious thought, the Vulcan reached for a fresh dressing and applied it, using pressure to staunch the flow of blood.

It was a deep wound, but a clean one and would heal with little difficulty. As Spock completed rebandaging it, his fingers drifted absently along Kirk's forearm. With effort, he dragged his senses back to awareness of what he was doing.

Kirk's eyes opened. "I'm all right. Just not as strong yet as I thought."

For a moment the Vulcan couldn't speak. When he did, his voice was choked with restrained emotion. "It will heal."

"I know. Atholian medicine is... ahead of its time."

"So I have heard."

"This isn't the first time I've been hurt here -- and probably won't be the last."

"No."

The Human's eyes strayed to the fresh bandage and the blood-soaked ones that had been discarded. "You could have called someone."

Spock answered with a raised eyebrow. Kirk seemed to relax at the familiar gesture. He smiled faintly as he continued, "Thank you."

The warm feelings were too much for Spock. They sought out the emptiness of his soul and would have filled it but for the burning fear they also caused. The pain, remembered agony still so fresh he trembled, throbbed through his frame until he couldn't think, couldn't breathe.

He stood. "I... delivered my message. If you do not choose to believe it, that is not my concern."

Kirk seemed to notice the abrupt mood swing. A palpable ache transmitted itself to Spock. "I believe you." The words were soft, tormenting.

"My people wish war. It would seem we have begun." He moved to turn away.

"Wait, Spock." The Vulcan froze. "We were almost talking there for a moment."

Spock rose and started for the exit. "The past is gone. The present... must be accepted."

"That we're on opposite sides, you mean."

"Yes."

"Well, that certainly gives you all the excuses you need to keep from facing me and what happened."

Spock ignored the statement and moved to raise the entry curtain. Kirk's next words halted him again.

"What if my side wins the war, Spock? Have you thought about that? How will you run from me then?"

The Vulcan couldn't answer. It was all he could do to stagger through the arras and mount his horse.

Inside the tent, Kirk listened to the sounds of Spock's horse carrying the fleeing figure away. He had watched the Vulcan closely during their conversation, trying to goad him into an honest reaction. In spite of his brutal words, Kirk wanted very much to trust Spock.

Spock's pain and confusion had reached him more strongly tonight than before and Kirk became convinced that some tenuous link still existed between them. Finding a way to break through the wall of madness however, was not going to be easy. The Vulcan had too many defenses, too many conflicting motivations, and refused to accept the one thing he needed most to give solace for his pain.

Above all, Kirk now sensed that most of the anger and bitterness in Spock was self-directed. *He must have denied the possibility of my existence so long, now he can't accept me, can't face the fact that he lived on without me. All his anger at himself spills over to me.* Kirk determined to find a way to show Spock that what the Vulcan considered to be a great wrong, forgetting Kirk, was only a defense mechanism, completely understandable. It was the only thing he could have done under the circumstances, or he would have died.

Kirk knew the Vulcan had been as fearful for his Captain's safety as he was worried about his own sanity. He remembered Spock's feeble attempts at comfort that last terrible night aboard the Klingon ship. Lost here without Kirk, that fear would have escalated. Only in putting Kirk completely out of his mind could he hold total insanity at bay.

Kirk was shaken by the realization. Spock's feelings for him had gone so deep, to reject them had cost a terribly high price. And realizing the fact of his rejection now hurt all the more. Spock probably felt his own sanity of less worth than the betrayal he must certainly view this act.

The Vulcan was not insane -- confused, desperate and hurting, yes, but not insane. Kirk had to reach him, find a way to break through. The feeling that once had been between them still existed, he was sure. The concern Spock displayed when Kirk had collapsed bore witness to that; it had blotted all else from the Vulcan's mind.


Perhaps he had not come, as he had said, to inform Kirk that he had not ordered the raid. That was probably true, but now the Human realized that Spock must have discovered that the *vadir* had been wounded during the fight, and had been driven by an emotional need to see how badly he had been injured.

Kirk heard again the sound of Spock's voice, the anguish in the single word, 'Jim.' *The first time he's used my name. He didn't have time to think, he just acted. He reached out to me, felt how much I still care... and it terrified him.*

The dilemma of how to get through to Spock seemed unsolvable at the moment. Kirk's head ached and his shoulder throbbed. When his doctor entered the tent and offered a cup of rusal, a sedative-like beverage, he did not refuse it. He needed to rest, to recuperate from the shoulder wound. Reaching Spock would require all his strength, the use of all his faculties.

And perhaps, Kirk thought as he drifted into sleep, it will require winning a war.

Five

The Atholian war council slowly dispersed, leaving the *vadir* seated alone beside the large relief map of the disputed territory. Kirk gazed at the carved soldiers and horses, the battle plans that had been laid out and positioned on the map, and sighed. He was committed to it now, to a war he had not been fully certain he should wage even before he had learned the identity of Maraden.

Yet war seemed to be the only alternative. The Sarapta were determined to attempt taking

the territory back into their possession, and would surely try to gain more Atholian land as well. The sovereignty of his entire nation-state was at stake, Kirk knew, Jankor could not let his people down, personal considerations notwithstanding.

Kirk had thought that because it was Spock leading the Sarapta, the whole character of the problem would change. It seemed he had been wrong, had been somehow foolishly idealistic, more like the James Kirk of long ago than the hardened warrior now called Jankor. The idealism and trust had been beaten out of him by the Klingons, a tough shell reinforced by the primitive life he had led for ten years.

He was a product of his environment, owing his survival to a people he could not reject. Their philosophies had become his own, even as he had been physically cared for by them. The Atholos revered their ancestors, yet they lived for the present, they were kind, yet only bestowed their trust on those who had earned it. Kirk had become Atholian. *Face it*, he told himself ruefully, *you've changed*.

Spock, too, had changed, not only because of his mental and emotional scars. The Vulcan had spent ten years living among the Sarapta and though Kirk could not begin to unravel the mystery of how Spock had risen to power as Maraden, the fact suddenly came home to him that the ten years Spock had lived among the savage Sarapta was a much longer period of time than the Vulcan had spent as Kirk's First Officer and friend.

I would never have thought to doubt your loyalty, Spock. But how could I expect you to remain loyal to something lost forever, something that never even existed, as far as you knew? Loyalty isn't a black and white issue for me anymore, either. As much as Kirk would have liked to base his actions on his memories of his and Spock's friendship, he knew he couldn't. He was uncertain about the Vulcan's sanity and his ability to be truthful, yet was even more definitely convinced that the rest of the Sarapta nation was not to be trusted. They would fight this war with all the skill and savagery they could muster, regardless of who led them. Spock or no, Kirk could not sacrifice the future of Atholos on behalf of a dream that had died out years ago.

The *vadir* had originally thought to wage primarily a defensive war. The Sarapta would attack, attempting to capture the Phelosius territory, and his warriors would defend, repulsing the invaders. Now he saw that would not be sufficient. He must do everything in his power to insure that all Atholian lands remained in his possession and the only way to do that was to cause heavy casualties among the vicious Sarapta.

The enemy had struck once; Jankor did not wish to allow them time to catch him unaware again. They would be expecting retaliation, he knew, yet he had planned carefully, expertly, unwilling to risk too many soldiers with an ill-conceived strategy.

A rustling sound in the room caught his attention. He turned; Theedra had entered and was clearing empty wine glasses the officers had used onto a large tray. She was watching Jankor covertly.

He gave the woman a slight smile and she crossed to where he was seated.

"All is well, Jankor?" she asked.

"We have completed our plans. We must see what happens next."

The Atholian female regarded him, her eyes narrowed in understanding, "You are troubled."

Jankor sighed, not wanting to hedge with her, yet unable to lie. "All wars bring misgivings." He stood, taking the heavy tray from her hands. Her eyes widened and he smiled, knowing what she was thinking: that he never behaved as the other men of Atholos. "I want you to return to the city, Theedra. Go to your uncle's house. You'll be safe there."

"You do not think Maraden will send his warriors into the city?" She was, as always, perceptive.

"He will be kept out." His chin lifted as he said the words.

"Ah," the woman nodded, "it is he that concerns you most, this Maraden."

He swallowed, shrugged a little. She smiled, replying before he had to. "I will go and be safe. Worry about your soldiers, your majori. Worry about the Sarapta and Maraden. The city that was my uncle's and is now yours will be safe. And so will all your people."

"I hope so, Theedra. For Norkor -- for all you and your people have given me, I'm going to try --"

"You will succeed." She reached up, taking the tray once more and was gone from the room.



At dawn, Jankor sat on his chestnut stallion watching the armies disburse. He had given his orders, now he would watch as his majori carried them out. It would take an entire day for the soldiers to regroup in the areas along the border of the Phelosius Territory, and at least another before there would be any heavy fighting. They were ready, Jankor knew. His men had trained all their lives for this moment. They were strong, loyal and fortunately, they were of sufficient number to carry out his plan without leaving the large, central cities completely without protection.

The Phelosius Territory stretched along the Sarapta border beginning in the western hills that had so recently been defended from the ambush attack at the new outpost and continued eastward into fertile plains. The Sarapta had hunted their small forests bare, the desert lands encroached even into their few cities. They were a warrior people forced to become agrarian, and they regarded the area they had once held as a rich crop land that would serve their interests well. They needed the black earth and the many rivers and streams that criss-crossed the Phelosius Territory.

Atholos needed the land as well. It was theirs by the right of possession, by the blood they had spilled to hold it and by the judicious use of it as Phelosius had intended. The rich, naturally growing herb vegetation here was the main resource of the amazing Atholian medical ability. Certain important curative herbs and berries would flourish nowhere else but along the banks of the muddy rivers that flowed through the region. By ceding the land to Sarapta for farming and the use of grazing animals, the medical miracles of the Atholos would be lost.

With thoughts of Atholian medicine, Jankor raised a hand to his recently wounded shoulder. It was healing rapidly and though the flesh was still tender he knew he would regain the use of the arm. McCoy would have enjoyed studying the native cures practiced in Atholos... Today, Jankor had little time for such wistful speculation, however. Thoughts of McCoy receded into the dim, unreachable past before the image of the doctor could bring up troubling pictures of Kirk's Vulcan First Officer once more.

The past is gone. Jankor must exist and function in the present.

The Atholian army separated into four distinct companies as morning flooded the countryside with light. Kirk watched at the head of one group while the others rode and marched out of sight toward their pre-arranged positions, then he gave the order for his division to follow him to the central location from which he would direct the coming conflict. He rode several miles deeper into Atholian territory to a quickly constructed command base. Intelligence reports had confirmed that the Sarapta army would strike again, and soon. *Vad'ir* Jankor knew Atholos was ready for them.



First Seer Maraden left the council chambers of the Elders' Assembly of Sarapta. He had come to report to the men on the plans of the army for the campaign ahead. The Elders appeared pleased that war was imminent now, that the chief priest seemed to have put aside the strange ideas of peace he had been attempting to promulgate.

Maraden himself had to admit that war was inevitable. The priest had allowed old memories to cloud his mind too much, old confusion to be carried over from the past to the present. He had spent the last few days looking closely at the countryside in which he lived, at the people who followed his teachings. He searched deep inside himself for what drove him to fulfill the needs of these people, what had given him the will to survive here. He could not find the answers, yet an intangible force moved within him. He lived, he did not merely exist. He was the chief priest of a warrior people. In this troubled time, he must fulfill his function, must lead them through the war and sustain their spirits until peace could be achieved. Any personal feelings he might have in the matter had to be put aside, controlled, ignored. Emotions were a trap. Down deep in his soul he knew he had once been certain of that face. Now, he felt it had been proved again.

The following morning found Maraden riding with the Sarapta forces that would attack Atholos. He sat astride his spirited gray horse and rode at the rear of the column with the commanders. He had given his blessing to the soldiers and had opted to ride with them. Many warrior priests had died on the battlefield. Maraden found that the commanders regarded the preacher of peace with new respect as he took his place as their leader.

It had been decided to strike directly at the heart of the disputed territory. Apparently Jankor was spreading his troops thinly, hoping to cover all possible areas that might be attacked. The center of the territory was an open plain, not divided by the streams that would make fighting difficult further up the valley. It should be quite easy to overrun it with Sarapta soldiers, to claim it as their own.

Yet Maraden did not underestimate the *vadir*. His enemy was a cool, level-headed tactician; he would certainly be expecting some kind of attack. Maraden had massed a huge division of soldiers for the confrontation and he knew no Atholian would be prepared for the well-trained fighters of the Sarapta army.

A spirit of zeal seemed to surge through the ranks as time drew near to begin the offensive. It was so strong even the normally emotionless First Seer picked it up. He reached out to it, allowing the palpable sense of pride and fearless savagery infect him. Yet in opening himself to the feelings, another emotion crept into his thoughts.

Loneliness swept into him, as though an open door in the chambers of his heart had let in a cold draft. And he saw the face of the Atholos *vadir*. *Kirk's face... No. He and I are aliens to one another now. We are each living a destiny we never sought, yet are trapped within. A destiny which must be played out to its conclusion.* With a shrug, Maraden straightened his shoulders, his face molding into lines of stern, calculating determination. He closed the doorway in his heart and put all thoughts, save those of Sarapta victory, from his mind.



Jankor had just finished taking his morning meal with the majori when a messenger entered the tent. The leader raised his hand, bidding the young runner to enter and relate his news.

"*Vadir*, it begins." The youth knelt at his side, breathless from running and urgency. "The massed Sarapta army even now attacks our central company in the Phelosius Territory."

"How many troops?" Jankor's voice was hard, business-like.

"We estimate nearly four thousand, *vadir*."

Jankor nodded. It was a large force, and the small army he had left guarding the center of the territory would not be able to hold them for long. It was as he had expected. Maraden had ordered most of his troops in a general offensive. If Jankor's strategy was a success, the *vadir* could have the war over in a very brief time indeed.

"They must hold them for two hours," the *vadir* told the runner. "Tell majori Jahnin he must hold that long, then continue with the battle plan as we discussed."

The youth nodded; Jankor gave him leave to refresh himself before passing on the *vadir's* orders.

Jankor turned to the majori seated at his table. "We must be ready."

The majori, all smiling in anticipation, nodded agreement.



The battle had been raging between Sarapta and Atholos on the plain of Phelosius for nearly two hours. Maraden watched from his vantage point behind the ranks as the outnumbered Atholians bravely held their ground against his superior forces.

The Sarapta battle cry resounded as calvary men ran Atholian infantry through with their lances. The sound was picked up by the Sarapta foot soldiers engaged in hand to hand combat with Atholians as the ground ran red with spilled blood.

Maraden felt a thrill run down his spine; he was as infected with the prospect of victory as any soldier in the field. The Atholians faltered, their lines wavered. This land had been Saraptan in antiquity, would be theirs again.

They took what was mine... using, hurting, killing... Maraden shook his head, clearing the haunting vision from his past. He must not become confused again now, must retain his sanity.

"They weaken, lord," commander Dorma cried, riding up to face Maraden. "They are running from us."

Maraden gazed silently toward the fighting, seeing the blur of clashing bodies and rearing horses, hearing the crash of colliding metal and the mingled cries of pain and triumph. "Press on. Follow them," he ordered. "We have the advantage. Use it to take what we will from these Atholian cowards."

Dorma's horse reared as the commander pulled at his reins. Maraden shivered in the sunlight, but the priest refused to name the emotions that fluttered into his consciousness.



"They have begun the retreat, *vadir*."

Jankor acknowledged the messenger with a nod, then turned to Erude, majori of the command base. "It is time."

The two made their way to their waiting horses and rode together to address the troops.

Jankor had brought calvary and bow-men to this base, along with a large number of infantry. Now, as he addressed the soldiers from the hillside, he could see spread out before him, the division, three thousand Atholians strong. His eyes roamed over the landscape, taking in the river valley leading from the plain of Phelosius where even now the morning battle raged. The retreating decoy force would draw the Sarapta down this valley where the command base division could descend on them.

Jankor smiled as dust clouds, signalling the approaching combattants, appeared far below. He was ready, in command, assured of his ability to lead his men. He looked toward Erude. "We have a chance, majori."

The Atholian nodded and returned a salute.



The Sarapta pressed on, forcing the faltering Atholian company back into their own territory. They left the dead and dying where they fell and fought on, forward, taking and killing.

The glory of battle beat strong in every Saraptan heart, from lowly footsoldier to the fierce commanders and even to the black-cloaked chief priest. Maraden's face was transformed; no longer stoic, he wore the look of the predator, the savage despoiler taking what he would have. Passion ruled now in his breast, blotting all else from his mind.

The Atholians were running now, turning in panic, hardly even fighting in their blind desire to escape. A hoarse cry broke from Maraden's throat, a battle shout, a challenge. The sound re-echoed through the ranks, swelling, setting the air afire with Saraptan determination and lust for victory, as they gave chase through the lower valley.

They were following the river now, men and horses falling in the water, trampled and drenched in the melee. Bright blades flashed, drawing blood, corded *vrela* weapons swooshed through the air, catching at the throats of intended victims to bring them down.

The surging sea of struggling bodies everged as the sun reached its zenith. Maraden stood in his saddle, his arm raised as he signaled his forces to fight even more furiously, his battle cry exhorting his warriors to destroy and capture before the weakened Atholians could flee...

The sound of another loud cry caught the Seer's attention. His eyes searched the valley, following the repeated shout up toward the foothills. For an instant, he froze. The image his eyes had focused on sent such feelings of terror and rage through his system, such extremes of passion and guilt, that for a moment, he was Maraden no longer.

He was Spock. Was Vulcan. He burned, under the red sky, upon the hot sand. The challenge had been made, the defiant Human had accepted. The blood burned, he was driven to fight, to kill... There could be no forbidding, no turning back. The ahn-woon pulled tight in his hands...

Maraden tore his eyes off the bronzed figure on the hill, swept his gaze over the descending horde of ambushing Atholians and back to his own somewhat depleted forces.

"Regroup!" The Sarapta fell in line, fatigue vanishing under the exhortations of their priest, fired on by rage at the cunning of their enemy.

Maraden rode back and forth behind the hastily reformed ranks, shouting orders, encouragement, invoking the gods, his hands tightening on the leather and vine cords of the *vrela* he swirled in the air.



Jankor's cry had been the signal. The Atholos army descended upon the surprised Sarapta forces. Their *vadir* watched them enter the battle, his eyes following the action that ensued.

Yet Kirk's heart was momentarily elsewhere. Despite the distance separating them on the field, he knew Spock had seen him, saw the war waged in the Vulcan's eyes at that moment, the change from recognition to torment and then to savagery. Spock became a stranger again, the war was being fought in earnest, for stakes neither of them had ever imagined.

Was this what it was like for my ancestors in America's civil war? Friend against friend, brother against brother? You are my brother, Spock, were my brother... brother of my soul, yet of my past...

Kirk shook his head, trying to clear his mind, trying to ignore the questions that beset him, the guilt. *This war is bigger than both of us, Spock. We were sent here by forces out of our control, forces outside of us swept us into this position. Damn it, I used to be in control of my life!*

Kirk's anguish was short-lived. Jahnin rode up, bloody and exhausted, a look of horror in his eyes.

"*Vadir*," he breathed, "it was almost... too much. They are... barbarians. A man would fall, and the one who struck him down would take time to cut out his heart before moving on..."

Jankor's hand tightened on the Atholian's shoulder. "They will not take our land, Jahnin." The words grated out, the *vadir* wearing a look of grim determination that solidified his nearly shaken confidence. "I won't let them."

He *would* control again. After urging Jahnin to get medical attention, Jankor dug his heels into his stallion's sides. The animal brought him along side the majori who had moved down the hill following the army.

Erude turned at his approach. " *Vadir*, this position is dangerous."

"This is where I belong, majori." Without another word, Jankor began directing the bow-men as they took position to fire.



The additional soldiers proved a more equal contest for the Sarapta. Though the warriors showed no signs of weakening, their numbers were growing depleted. Still, Maraden urged them on. He no longer needed a reason to fight, he knew only that they must fight. And they must win.

His eyes smarted as the dust rose around him, his head pounded with the onslaught of noise. The battle seemed never-ending.

Headaches... body struggles... information... can't give up... must fight... always fight back... no matter what they do, no matter how it hurts...

"My lord?" Commander Dorma's voice brought him back to demented reality out of a tortured past.

"Report." Maraden barked out the order and Dorma forgot the Seer's apparent lapse of attention.

"They fight well. They are fresher than we and had the element of surprise, but I believe we can yet win."

"Good. I will not accept defeat on any terms."

Dorma nodded. "If we can just hold them a little longer..."

A whooping cry cut the Sarapta off mid-sentence. The two looked up in time to see two separate Atholian armies bearing down on them.

They rode in from the east and the west, the remaining two companies Jankor had positioned earlier as part of his master strategy. They had been signaled at the start of the battle with the command base troops and now the lancers rode in, joining with the fighting infantry from the command base to effectively surround the Sarapta.

Commander Dorma and First Seer Maraden, who had only a moment ago been safely at the rear of the fighting, now found themselves facing a direct attack.



Jankor watched the charging cavalry, pleased at the well-timed execution of his plan. He shouted orders to the command base troops and, from their hillside positions, the archers let fly a fusillade of arrows. Kebba-throwers on horseback aimed and brought down increasing numbers of Sarapta and more of the surrounded enemy began to fall under the arriving lancers' blades.

A black cape flying in the wind caught his attention. Kirk's eyes riveted on Spock in time to see the Vulcan grab at the Sarapta officer who had been riding at his side. It was obvious from the way the body fell that the commander was dead.

With their chief military leader down, Jankor felt a surge of triumph. Now the battle would certainly be his. Yet, inside the *vadin*, Kirk's heart twisted as he realized the acute physical danger in which Spock had now been placed.

At my command... he reflected, knowing that he had ordered Spock to face possible death before. The situations were not comparable, though. Torn in two, the Human could only watch and hope. *I don't want him dead, yet I can't help him without helping the Sarapta, without betraying my people. It's the war I want to win, Maraden. I don't wish your death.*



Below, the priest let the dead commander fall to the ground. His eyes took in the altered situation, his mind flashed into gear. Panic and indecision were alien to the leader of the Sarapta, to the former Vulcan starship science officer. Within him, the powers of logic and command-training surfaced, replacing the emotional instability.

He made swift calculations: odds, men, weaponry. His mind rifled memorized history tapes, culled from them and adapted with inspired improvisation.

The bowmen on the hillsides above were astoundingly accurate and the Sarapta they missed with their arrows were beginning to fall under the lances of the cavalry and mounted kebbathrowers.

Maraden shouted orders, first calling for his men to tighten their ranks, then to raise their shields above their heads as protection from the down-raining arrows.

Then, with himself at the apex, his troops formed a triangle, a solid wedge of spears and shields. Maraden called a strategic retreat, reinforcing the order with a repetition of the Sarapta war cry, as loud and as proud as he could make it. As one, his army moved, locked together against their attackers, forcing their way through the lines, protecting themselves and inflicting as much damage to the Atholos as they could on the way.



Above, on the hillside, the Atholos *vadir* watched with mingled chagrin and relief as Spock, at the head of the Sarapta, literally plowed his way out of the trap Kirk had sprung.

Hours later, Jankor sat listening to the reports of his majori, counting the casualties Atholos had suffered, estimating the losses of Sarapta. The long day's battle had been costly, yet indecisive. The enemy had managed to escape back into their own territory, and with so many Atholos dead and injured, Jankor had not ordered they be followed.

As the Sarapta army struggled home, he had to content himself with the knowledge that Atholos still held the Phelosius Territory... and that he could not name Spock among the dead.

The lines had been drawn now, though, the first contest entered. There had been no reservations and now there could be no retreat. Kirk knew it, and he was sure the Vulcan, no matter how his twisted mind perceived the war, knew it, too.

Six

Kirk rode his chestnut stallion slowly back into camp and climbed stiffly down from the horse. Another day of unrelenting heat, another day of battle was over, and he was filthy, aching and tired. Almost staggering with fatigue, he stepped into his tent, ordering an aide to prepare his bath.

For a few moments, Kirk managed not to think as he stripped off the heavy breastplate he wore, pulled the sweat-soaked undertunic over his head and then unlaced the close fitting, knee-high leather boots. The only intrusive thought as he untied the braided cord that circled his forehead and kept the hair out of his eyes when riding was that he sometimes felt he'd never get used to the clothing worn here. It was heavy, uncomfortable and most of all, he always felt so exposed, with the style that left his thighs mostly uncovered. At least, it seemed that way to one raised with man-made fabrics and clothing styled for functional comfort.

Dropping the last of his garments into the pile on the floor, he eased himself into the steaming tub. His servant moved to gather up the clothing but the *vadir* ordered him away. He wanted to relax, to be alone, to be himself for a while.

He leaned back in the deep, scented water and gradually the tension began to ease. He lathered his body, washing away the mountain grime, letting himself begin to think again.

Kirk needed this time alone, to be 'Kirk', not Jankor, for a while. Keeping up appearances was becoming more and more difficult as time went by and the war continued. He thought ruefully about the trite old phrase, 'loneliness of command' and realized that it was like most cliches -- very, very true. Never in his life had he felt more alone than now. It wasn't just because of always having to be someone else, the *vadir* of a people he truly cared about but would always be set apart from, or having to lead them in a war he had hoped to avoid. He'd fought for less reason before, become involved in wars he knew need not have escalated. This was different, however. In this case, his enemy was Spock.

Kirk hadn't seen the Vulcan up close since their last conversation almost three months ago. Yesterday, he'd caught sight of him astride a spirited gray horse, his black, flowing priest's robes standing out in contrast to the bright uniforms and plumed helmets of his soldiers. Kirk had wanted to make his way across the field, hoping to speak with him, or at least catch his eye, but the lines of men in hand to hand combat were too tight. He'd only watched, helplessly, directing his majori to win the battle, yet fearing every moment he would see Spock's horse go down. For a few minutes, as the fighting became even more intense, Kirk was distracted. When he looked up, Spock was nowhere to be seen. It was only later, as the dust began to settle and men lay dead and dying in the field, that Kirk had spied him, and

only then did his fear ease. The dark figure rode slowly away, toward Sarapta, his horse seeming to move tiredly, as if his spirit too, was gradually waning. *Spock never wanted to fight this war, either, Kirk has thought as a dull despondency settled over him.*

The fear that Spock might be hurt or killed had remained with him since the big battle that had begun the war. *How illogical. I want to win the damned war so I can reach him, but I could get him killed in the process,* Kirk decided wryly. He figured even Spock would see little logic in the whole, convoluted situation.

Apparently, however, Spock's feelings about Kirk had not yet sorted themselves out. The Vulcan remained single-minded in his purpose, waging war with an almost computer-like predictability. Kirk decided there was nothing wrong with his mind in that area, at least.

He thought back to the many hours he and Spock had spent in a different kind of battle, over the chess board. Those pleasant times now seemed so far away, the current scenario a horrible mockery of what they once had shared. Still, Kirk found himself second-guessing the Vulcan, using what he knew about the way he reasoned, what kind of tactics he'd use, to his advantage now.

It seemed Spock retained some memory of the Human's strategies as well. Since both sides had sustained heavy losses in the first, huge confrontation, the war had become a stalemate, battle after battle waged without turning the tide in either direction. Sometimes the Atholos would appear to be winning, then, as today, the Sarapta would move ahead. It was frustrating.

Kirk found himself desperately wanting to win the war, to have an end to it. No more lives, Sarapta or Atholian, need be pointlessly sacrificed. Every day that passed meant to Kirk that he was taking more chances with Spock's life and with his own. Having failed to make the Vulcan see reason before, Kirk determined to win him on the field of battle, to make Spock understand that he couldn't run away from him any more.

Yet Kirk wondered what he would do with the Vulcan should Atholos eventually win, and he worried what losing might do to the Vulcan's already bruised psyche. Kirk didn't know whether Spock actually might want to lose, deep down in some secret, unadmitted part of himself, or if the Vulcan might turn even more hate and anger toward his former Captain in the event that the Human's side emerged victorious.

What am I trying to prove, he wondered, that I'm stronger, better than he is? That I can see how deeply he's been hurt and still kick him when he's down? No. He doesn't remember what we had. I was satisfied here before I found who he was, just as he seems satisfied to be Maraden. I should leave it at that. The Klingons taught me to be satisfied just at being alive.

Kirk closed his eyes, his hands balled into tight fists. *No, damn it. I know him better than anyone, he let me get closer to him than anyone else in the universe. He can't have changed -- neither of us can have changed so much that I can't see how deep his scars go, how desperately he needs me now, whether he can admit that need or not. No matter how much he's afraid to face that need, it's there.*

Gradually, Kirk forced his muscles to relax, to pull himself out of the trap of depression. *Sometimes, the more a person claims they don't need help, the more they fight against you, the more pitifully they're crying out.* He reached to rinse the last of the lather from his body and climbed out of the tub. As he towelled his body dry, one last thought crystalized. *And, damn it, I need him, too.*

Perhaps he should try again to reach him. Spock had, after all, come to see him twice, alone and without guards or personal retinue. Something had urged the Vulcan to seek Kirk out, deny it though he might. There was between them a mutual ache of unfulfilled promise. The link they had tried to form and been unable to complete seemed in a shadowy way to still exist, to be drawing them together. Somewhere, just beyond conscious awareness, it called. What they had meant to each other could not be destroyed or blotted out, not by any pain inflicted or years of separation.

Kirk resolved to at least try to approach Spock one more time. It would take careful planning; traveling between Atholos and Sarapta now was highly dangerous. He could leave the outposts in the hands of experienced majori, then take one or two trusted guards with him for protection. It would be risky, but well worth the price if he were successful.



Spock rose from his knees, muscles stiff and aching from the length of time he had maintained the position before the fire-altar in his tent. The meditation flame had not been able to work its magic on him tonight and he realized that it had never been as effective as a genuine firepot would be. It was, however, all he had. The flame was calming in its own way, but he could not release his mind to it, could not find surcease for his troubled soul.

The Vulcan walked slowly to sit on the bed, the heavy robes he wore rustling as he moved, dragging him down by their weight. He sat heavily, hunched over, and slowly raised his hand to knead at the back of his neck. His headache was constantly there; it had been with him for so long now it was an accepted part of him and sometimes he could nearly forget about it. Yet tonight it flared up worse than usual.

It was the pain of seeing more young men of Atholos and Sarapta killed in the battle today, and the pain of ten years accumulation of unshed tears. It was the pain of being the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-understanding priest to his adopted people, yet being only half a person to himself. It was the knowledge that he was using these innocent people, no matter how much he tried to rationalize it, waging the war not for them, but for some twisted, barely comprehended reason of his own and Kirk's. It was the ache of hurting and of causing hurt -- and it would never end.

The battle today had been a victory for Sarapta. His adversary had used surprise strategy again, and only the viciousness of the Saraptan warriors had turned the tide. Outside Maraden's tent, his people celebrated. They had left him to himself after he had consecrated the bodies of the dead. He was and always had been an enigma to them, more alien, more separate from them than the divinity they believed he possessed would have made him.

Lately, he knew they wondered more seriously about his actions. Though among the Sarapta, ancient morality would not condemn him for killing Cadon, the act of rage went against every tenet of peace and logical consideration Spock had preached. Some now had come to fear him, and despite his actions on the battlefield, he sensed that some had lost respect. There would come a day when the people would decide he had outlived his position. Then they would kill him. That day might come very soon if he could not help them win the war against Atholos. Yet sometimes, he thought of death as a welcome respite and perhaps would not fight it when it came. He had regrets that he would not live to accomplish certain things, that some things would never be again, but whatever hell he might find himself cast into could be no worse than the waking damnation in which he lived.

Suddenly the tent flap was lifted. Spock roused slightly and discovered Gelbar bending over him. The aide helped him up from the floor. The Vulcan had not been aware of falling.

"You cried out, my lord." Gelbar's tone was quiet, solicitous. "Here." He indicated a goblet. "I have brought your medicine."

Spock took the cup with shaking hands. The stuff was bitter, vile-tasting, but he knew he needed it tonight. Soon the artificial warmth suffused his body, his restless mind relaxed and he lay back against his cushions, falling into a deep and much needed sleep.

His mind drifted for a time, aloft in a safe refuge where all blows were cushioned, where he need not wake or think or be. At length, the ever-present pull upon his consciousness to rouse, to struggle against the enemies whose faces he had forgotten became apparent.

Dreaming, he pulled himself out of the limbo of enforced peace, determined at last to face the one tormenting him. But he knew with a sickening assurance that, even as he could never hope to win, he would never find the foe defined, never see the one who continued to torment him so.

Running now, his body yielding to the commands of a beleaguered brain, he made his way through an illogically rain-soaked desert, searching, striving. He bounded up one sodden dune and down another, sliding in the thirsty sand. Finally crawling, he pulled himself over a dune piled higher than the rest, sensing that he might, for once, be approaching his goal.

There, below, a figure stood. He could see just the outline, make out only the silhouette. He began to hurry, to climb down the soggy slope. There was green below, a bounty of blooming flowers and harvested fruits. He was so... empty.

Now he could see the figure. Clothed in drab grey robes that clung wetly to the body, a poignant contrast to the living green in which he stood, the figure was hooded, tall, alone. He remained death-like and emotion-starved amid the bounty of which he could not partake.

"Who... are... you?" The question was dragged from unwilling lips. He thought he recognized those robes, that divine detachment, that costume used to mask unending pain. It was a portrait of what he tried to be, could never achieve.

In answer, the figure turned, a hand reached to lower the concealing hood.

He froze, meeting wide and trusting hazel eyes. "Jim? Jim, no..." The smile, half-formed, faded from the Human's lips. The figure, bending under the weight of too much hurt, began to fade away.

"NO!" He ran, throwing himself down the dune, a last desperate attempt to reach out. He was falling, rolling in the slippery sand, losing, letting go, as the rain beat him down. Only it wasn't rain, he found, as salty droplets slaked his face. It wasn't rain, but tears...

Spock wrenched himself awake, his stomach cramping, chest heaving. His throat ached and his eyes burned, but the tears had not broken through the iron-willed physical control he still held over his body. The captive emotions could never be allowed to break free, the door could never be unlocked. He knew madness awaited him on the other side.

The heavy black robes he'd been wearing when he fell asleep were constricting, uncomfortable. He ripped at the folds, yanked at ties until he was free of them and the chill of morning air prickled his sweat-damp skin.

He washed in the basin at the bedside, savoring the cool, tasteless water, *not salty, not tears...* then dressed in lighter, more comfortable clothes. He pulled open the tent flap and gazed out. All was quiet in the compound, the revelers had not yet awakened. He could have some privacy.

Spock walked slowly out of the camp, following a well-worn path up into the hills. He had found a solitary place up there, a wind-carved niche in the mountain, high and sun-swept. It matched his loneliness, his longing for the other home he'd lost, could not let himself wish for faces that had disappeared. Thus, he had fallen into the habit of seeking out places that reminded him of Vulcan. It was the only solace he permitted himself.

This morning, though, as the wind ruffled his hair and plucked at his robes, the dream that had wakened him was too much with him still. He could not forget how Kirk's face had looked, how the Human's eyes had lit with recognition, then darkened with despair. Kirk was the ideal he could never achieve, the person he could never hope to reach, deserve to have. He was Earth, was warmth, was green-growing life and blue-promise skies. He could no more get him out of his mind than he could remove the Human elements from his blood.

Trembling, Spock leaned against a rock, sliding down into a sitting position. He folded his arms across the gritty surface and rested his head on them. The weight of his grief was especially heavy this morning, the ache threatening to defeat his will. He would release it, but knew there would be no comfort from the release, nothing to gain and everything to lose. It was after all the only thing he still possessed, the only control he still managed to retain.

Spock gradually relaxed, withdrawing into himself to a place where nothing mattered, where reserves of Vulcan strength were stored, where nothing of the real world could touch him. He hoped to emerge ready to face a few more terrible days here, even though the temptation to remain in his safe haven was strong. Then he noticed that something was wrong, it wasn't working. The strength of logic had withered, the haven of the mind had become a plundered cave. There was no refuge, there could be no future. He was totally alone.



Kirk left his bodyguards below the hillside where he had spotted the Vulcan, directing them to wait and to interrupt his meeting with Maraden only to warn him of imminent danger.

When he climbed up to the level where Spock was kneeling, he was suddenly struck by the stillness of the Vulcan. Spock seemed not to be simply meditating, but almost comatose, as if he had somehow wished to distance himself from the world.

Kirk's heart twisted at the sight of the tragic figure. He moved close, still concerned lest he interrupt him or be rejected once again. He spoke his name gently, then louder, but Spock didn't hear, couldn't answer. Then Kirk could hold back no longer. He reached out, drawing Spock close to him, enfolding him with arms that ached to comfort,



From a great distance, Spock became aware of a voice calling him. He was expected to respond, required to respond... He lifted his head,

For a moment, he thought he was dreaming again. Kirk was so close, so warm... so real. His lips trembled as he tried to speak the name,

"Jim? You're here... holding me?"

"I'm here, Spock," The voice was golden, rich with love, soft with reassurance.

The wary Vulcan tensed to struggle, fighting again within himself, with dreams and hopes and needs.

Kirk tightened his grip. "No. Don't run any more. You'll only hurt us both again."

"No," Spock protested, still fearing the inevitable. "I can't."

Kirk's eyes searched the ravaged face. "Yes. *We* can." He moved slowly, tenderly, lifting his hand to place it along the side of Spock's cheek, to smooth the care lines of wasted years, to transmit his Human warmth.

In his arms, the tense body shuddered as defenses crumbled. Then the Vulcan stilled, as if by an act of pure will, and with a strength the Human had forgotten, he pulled out of Kirk's embrace.

Surprised, Kirk made no further move to approach.

"Don't you see? Won't you understand?" Spock's voice was rasping. "We've become two different people."

"Different names, maybe. But inside we're the same," Kirk was insistent.

"Why do you believe that?"

The Human met the troubled Vulcan eyes for a long moment before replying. At length he said quietly, "I have to. Knowing who I am is the most important thing I've ever had. And knowing you, trusting you..." His words trailed off for a moment; he swallowed, then went on. "My identity, my personality, that's the only thing the Klingons couldn't take away. They took everything else, nearly ended my life, but they couldn't change me. And I know they couldn't change you. Not really, not where it counts. To believe we had been changed as much as you think would be to deny everything we had together before."

It seemed Spock winced as Kirk spoke. His words, when he answered, were choked. "It was my *mind*... my sanity..."

"You're saying that because they used a mind-sifter on you, Spock of Vulcan doesn't exist anymore? I don't believe it. I've seen your tent, the way it's decorated, heated. I've heard your 'peace and logic' rhetoric. God, Spock, you even still play the old logic versus emotion game. You were hurt, very, very seriously, but the damage is healing. You owe it to yourself to accept that -- to accept everything."

Spock kept his eyes averted and for a long time Kirk thought he wouldn't answer. When he did speak, the question he asked seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Did you ever wonder, if we had finally met under different circumstances rather than as national enemies, what we would say to one another?"

Not sure where Spock was leading, Kirk answered slowly. "I'd be glad to see you, no matter what. I'd tell you how I'd tried to search for you..."

"You did?"

"Yes, Spock. Of course. I was... in pretty bad shape at first and had to do some recuperating, and then when I was finally able to go, I was injured again, attacked by a mountain cat, but..."

"But you did try."

Spock looked up at him then, and Kirk instantly regretted his words. The anguish in the Vulcan's expression tore at him and his words were like knives, wounding them both.

"I didn't. I didn't look for you, I didn't even wonder where you were. I just forgot."

"No." Even though Kirk had surmised the truth, hearing Spock say the words still shook him, still hurt. Yet he had to continue to believe that Spock wasn't responsible for his actions.

Spock had backed up a step. "Yes. You were gone, entirely, from my mind, my consciousness, my heart."

"The Klingons did that." Kirk stepped toward him.

"No. I did it. I did it!"

"Why?"

"I was insane."

"Perhaps. But you lived. That's not a crime. And it doesn't mean you're still insane. You're capable of leading an entire, powerful nation. You couldn't do that and be crazy. Besides, you said I was gone from your conscious memory. Subconsciously..."

Spock shivered suddenly, clutching at his arms in the warm breeze. "You won't listen!"

"Then talk to me." Kirk advanced toward him.

"I... forgot... *YOU!*" The words came out harshly, bitterly. The Vulcan's shoulders shook.



By John '82

"Spock. Look at me." When their eyes met, Kirk went on. "Who am I?"

Spock could not make his voice respond.

"You know me. You know my name, you remember who we were, what kind of friendship we shared, just as I remember. And no matter what sides we're on in this damn war, that still makes you the closest person to me on this planet, the only one who shares a past with me."

Kirk reached out, putting his hands on Spock's shoulders lightly. "Who am I?"

"Jankor... "

Kirk shook his head.

"J -- Jim... "

The Human's hands squeezed the shoulders they held; his eyes glistened as the Vulcan spoke his name with assurance at last.

"I... had forgotten. But -- you came back into my mind and your image would not go away... "

"That's right. You do remember," Kirk lifted one hand to Spock's face again, moving closer.

Spock could no longer fight the need, the touch, the patient acceptance. He could no longer resist the ache that tore at the back of his throat, the pain that welled behind his eyes. His arms went around Kirk, clinging as if he thought the offered comfort might suddenly be withdrawn, and he buried his face against Kirk's shoulder, gasping.

From Kirk's eyes, tears began to fall, rolling down his cheeks to drop on the bowed head he held.

Kirk tried to wipe his face and the Vulcan, noticing the movement, raised his head. Spock reached to touch the tears that glistened on the Human's cheek and, on impulse, brought his fingers to his lips. These were not the salt tears of remorse he had so feared, but a precious, purifying gift. As their gazes locked, Spock's eyes brimmed, he swallowed wetly, and his own long-withheld tears flowed free.

He pulled himself even closer to Kirk, and felt a responsive tightening of the Human's embrace. The sudden, violent release of emotion held in check so long shook them both. Spock felt as if his heart would rip open with the torrent, that the pain in his chest was worse than all the guilt and remorse he had carried through the years.

His body wracked by sobs, his throat torn with the harshness of his cries, his eyes on fire with the flowing tears, the Vulcan feared for a moment that this grief would carry him to death, that the breaking of his self-imposed control would end his life.

But no. There was something solid to hold on to. There was the sound of another soul crying in the wilderness. There was another whose tears touched his flesh.

Through the terrible tumult of his pain, Spock heard Kirk's voice, murmuring, echoing as he had heard it in so many long-forgotten dreams.

"You're alive, Spock. You're alive. You're here. Finally here. I finally found you. You're alive... "

The Human choked out the words, repeating them over and over again, a litany, a celebration.

And Spock's pain eased. This letting go was not for death. It was for life, for their second chance, their resurrection.

*"To serve at your side in the starlight,
To follow you even to death...
To be your shield, your companion, your friend..."*

*And to wait and to trust in forever
Till we stand side by side once again."*

The words of an old, dimly remembered verse filled Spock's mind and gave him peace. He had put Kirk out of his mind rather than believe him dead. There had been no image of death, however, no reality that a corpse and burial would have insured, thus Kirk's existence had continued. Hope had endured, in Spock as well as in Kirk. They had gambled on and won before with nothing on their side but hope.

His thoughts becoming more coherent, Spock gradually became aware of his physical surroundings again, of the morning sunlight, of the dampness of sweat and tear-soaked clothes, both his own and those pressed against him. Kirk had been crying, too, with him, for him. Kirk still knew Spock, trusted him, needed him. *And it is said Vulcans are loyal...*

The bemused thought came as the desperate catharsis eased. The crushing agony lifted and was replaced by a sense of time recaptured, a merging of wounded spirits in healing rebirth.

When the last tears were gone, their eyes sought each other once again. Spock was the first to speak, his voice thick with feeling. "I know you... and I know who I am." There was wonder in his eyes, in the words.

The Vulcan brought a hand up to touch his head, the pain he had lived with for years still asserting its nagging presence. The ache depressed him, nearly deflated his reborn sense of sanity.

"Spock, what is it?"

He gazed at the Human before him, caressing with his eyes the well-remembered features, drinking in the concern expressed by the hazel eyes. Yet insanity had been his constant companion for so long that Spock feared these moments of clarity would not last.

A sudden, sharp recollection of their final night together while in the custody of the Klingons reappeared. He had felt himself slipping, losing control, becoming irrational, moments of disorientation crowding out his mental awareness.

Kirk had been willing to help him then, offering the safe haven of his mind. Instead, Spock's touch had caused them both pain, the momentary, crushing agony they had felt at the time, and the endless grief of the ten year separation.

No, Spock's new-found rationality insisted, *it was the Klingons, not something you yourself caused.* The thought buoyed him up, gave him confidence.

The Vulcan suddenly found he wanted more than anything to enfold Kirk's consciousness within his own. The merging could reassure him, affirm his recovery. Yet he had not used the ability in so long that he wondered if he still possessed the skill required for anything beyond a superficial meld.

"Jim," He broached the question tentatively, not knowing how his eyes reflected it as a plea. "We tried to meld... before. Do you think it would be possible now?"

Kirk perceived his pain. "I need you, too, Spock."

They had shared agony, been separated by it. They had shared emotion and been cleansed by it. Now, in a moment of unparalleled clarity, each man knew the other believed in the power of the Vulcan mind to heal, to seal the promise of the moment and to make each wounded spirit whole and complete.

Moving as if in a dream, Spock held Kirk's face in both his hands. The Human's reddened eyes seemed huge and needful now, yet so willing to accept, to help. "How can I deny you any more?" The words were murmured in a soft whisper; Spock seemed barely aware of having said them aloud. His fingers moved into the required position for a meld, his eyes closed. His mind opened,...

"*Vadir!*" The desperate sound of voices and scrambling feet broke the spell. Hastily, Kirk disentangled from Spock's embrace and stood, moving toward the sounds. Behind him, the

Vulcan too managed to get to his feet, trying to shake off the emptiness that invaded his soul as Kirk left his side.

"Sorda? Meldar? What's happening?"

The two guards' eyes were wide with panic; they were in a state of agitation Kirk had never observed in them before.

"Strange men, *vadir*. They wear strange clothes and carry strange weapons!" Sorda gibbered.

Kirk shot a look at Spock, a cold fear clamping around his heart, "Meldar?" He nodded toward the calmer of the two.

"Yes, *vadir*. They point the weapons toward the Sarapta, a strange sound happens, and the people fall."

Kirk spared a moment to translate the information for Spock, then turned back to his men. "These strangers -- describe them."

Sorda drew a calming breath. "They are tall, strong looking. They wear black, tight fitting clothes and their faces, too, are dark."

"Klingons." Kirk felt the tensing of the Vulcan's body beside him. "Go," he directed his men. "See what you can find out. Do not be seen or captured. Find out if they are here only, or if they are also in Atholos. Report back here as quickly as you can."

Their leader's steadiness and specific instructions gave the guards back the courage they usually possessed. With brief bows, they scrambled to do his bidding.

Kirk and Spock looked at each other.

"It is, almost certainly, a Klingon invasion." Spock's voice was low.

Kirk nodded soberly. "We've been caught in the middle of one of those before."

Spock didn't blink. "But these people are not Organians."

The Human agreed. "And we can't count on a starship getting us out of it."

Spock turned away a moment, attempting to restrain his reeling emotions. He felt disappointment that the moment of closeness with Kirk had been interrupted, anger at the thought of his proud people being subjugated by the vicious space pirates. He would not let it happen, not while he possessed an ounce of strength. And yet, overshadowing everything, obscuring logic with a red haze, was fear. He experienced a complete and total fear for Kirk's life and for his own, doubting suddenly if he had the courage to face Klingon torture again.

Kirk reached out to touch him, turning him back around, grasping both his shoulders and holding tight. "I'm scared, too, Spock."

"We cannot let them ravage this world." Spock found his voice steadier than he would have believed possible. He felt strength pouring into him, mind and body geared up to face the fight ahead. He'd had ten years of grief, ten years of agony and guilt, ten years of helplessness and knowing there would be no retribution for what had been done to him, to Kirk. As a modern Vulcan, as an officer of Starfleet, he might never have sought payment for the way he and Kirk had been wronged, even if they had been rescued. Yet here, because of the Klingons, he had lived as a primitive again, gotten back in touch with the savagery that had shaped his heritage. Now at last, he might find an outlet for the anger that had grown and festered inside him all these years, anger that he had wrongly directed at Kirk and at himself, hatred that had nearly driven him insane...

"Spock. Spock!" Kirk was shaking him and slowly, the red haze lifted from his vision. "Spock, I despise them, too, but we've got to be careful. We can't let them know who we are."

"We can continue in our roles," Spock agreed. "Perhaps the guises of seer and *vadir* are more suited to us than that of merchant and... Baronet."

Kirk smiled thinly. "We've had ten more years of practice in these roles, besides. We'll appear to capitulate, try to buy time to save lives. But we have to stop them, destroy their weapons, weaken their position -- "

"We don't know how many there are, what kind of ship they have," Spock cautioned. "And my people will not capitulate. They will rally from the first shock and die before letting themselves be ruled by the Klingons. They will not understand that they are aliens and capable of destroying them."

"I know." Kirk's hands squeezed his shoulders again, then he turned to gaze down the mountainside. "I wonder how my men are doing. We need information."



Two hours dragged by while they waited, hours in which they discussed half-formed plans, differing contingencies that could be followed depending on the numbers and location of the Klingon forces.

The sun was high in the sky when Sorda and Meldar returned. The guards had managed to observe that the disruptor-stunned captives had revived and were being held in a hastily constructed compound. The Klingons had transported down munitions and other supplies and seemed intent on building a military base in the heart of Sarapta territory. The guards had counted a hundred of them, and had seen them arriving in silver flying vehicles.

Kirk and Spock exchanged a look, but neither spoke of the temptation to steal away in one of the shuttlecraft. It would be an escape that would cost the people here too much, and would probably be pointless as well. A shuttle could not hope to outrun a Klingon cruiser.

"Have they invaded Atholos?" Kirk asked instead.

"They do not seem to know of our land, *vadir*." Meldar spoke with evident relief.

"Good." He turned to the Vulcan. "Spock, do anything you can to hold them here in your territory. We can't risk them taking Atholos, too. I'll bring back my armies and we'll fight them together."

A slight smile quirked at the corners of Spock's mouth. "It would seem Atholos and Sarapta must unite against a common enemy."

"Perhaps that's what they've been moving toward all along," Kirk answered in kind. "Can you quote me the odds against our success?"

"Even a large force will be virtually unarmed against their technology, and thus cannot hope to win out, but we can give them a fight they will perhaps not soon forget."

"Remember when we blew up that munitions dump together on Organia?"

"Yes. And we had little hope of winning then."

"Let's do it again, Spock. Hold them here until I can get back to help you." He turned, motioning his guards to follow.

"Jim." The hand on his arm halted him, the eyes were beseeching. "You will come back." It was not quite a statement.

Kirk put worlds of meaning into his answer. "Just as soon as I can get my troops together and briefed." The words belied the intensity of feeling.

Spock nodded. "I'll hold them, but..." He paused, swallowing, and his hand tightened convulsively around Kirk's wrist. "I would prefer fighting them together. It would prove they didn't destroy us ten years ago."

Kirk's voice was low. "They didn't, Spock. We proved that this morning."

The Vulcan went on. "And if we cannot stop them... I would prefer to die by your side."

Kirk took the Vulcan's hands in his, holding them for a long moment while he gazed into the haunted sable eyes. His throat constricted with the knowledge that Spock was probably right; they were almost sure to die in the coming conflict.

"We'll be together," he murmured finally. "Have faith in that."

Their eyes held a moment longer, then Spock broke the silence. "There are people below who also have faith -- in me. I must go to them, now."

Kirk nodded. "Until we meet again, Spock..." He let the words trail off, too overcome to say anything more.

"Together." Spock whispered the reply, the promise. Then they broke apart and went their separate ways.

Seven

Kirk rode at the front of a long column of warriors, leading the wagons, the horse soldiers and infantry, the great massed army of Atholos. He had gathered a contingency consisting of two-thirds of his forces to march into Sarapta, having been unwilling to leave Atholos itself completely unguarded. Only a miracle would prevent their destruction by the Klingons. If they were not killed, they would certainly be subjugated, but he could not leave his adopted land unprotected when the alien invasion came.

How ironic that just as his life here had found some meaning, the Klingons had returned to take it all away again. He and Spock could not hope to succeed against the might of a Klingon warship, but they had no desire to live under their domination, either. Kirk knew that he was riding on a suicide mission.

Somehow, he had infected his army with a brave spirit. They rode into death with innocent bravery, ready to aide their historic enemy Sarapta against an alien foe. Sorda and Meldar had told how the new enemy had served to unite Jankor and Maraden. If the *vadir* believed they should aid the Sarapta, his people could not, would not question. Kirk doubted whether many of them truly understood the alien nature of the Klingons, whether they would ever grasp the awesome superiority of their technology. Yet they were a proud people who deserved to be free. And they would die. The Klingons would not take kindly to the attempted resistance.

It had taken Kirk eight days to call in his troops, eight days to plan the assault on Klingon-occupied Sarapta, eight days to instruct his men in what they were facing. And for eight days, his mind had been elsewhere, worrying about what was happening with Spock.

The elaborate relay messenger system Kirk had earlier devised told him that the Klingons had not yet attempted to move toward Atholos. Thus he knew that Spock was managing to hold them within his territory. Still, Kirk could not help wondering how. He knew the Vulcan would go to any lengths to preserve his people and to protect Kirk as long as possible, but he would not have had the opportunity to coach his men the way Kirk had; the Klingons had virtually taken over completely by the time Spock had returned to the central city. He would have to

run the resistance from underground, working with the few military men who might not have been imprisoned or killed early in the assault. And Spock himself would have to be very careful. If the Klingons discovered the Vulcan, they would certainly torture and possibly kill him, thinking that he was part of a Federation envoy. Kirk didn't care to dwell on that possibility.

The Klingons had hurt Spock so badly before, he couldn't be looking forward to facing them again. Spock was strong, he wasn't afraid of the Klingons per se, but Kirk knew he feared the thought of them tampering with his mind again. The catharsis he and Kirk had shared that morning on the hillside had gone a long way toward healing the Vulcan's old wounds, yet the hatred that had built for ten years could not be turned off so quickly. The emotion could be used to his advantage, however. Kirk knew that, given half a chance, Spock would prove a formidable enemy to the Klingon invaders.

Kirk sighed, forcing his mind off the coming conflict. He sought to relax, to rest as much as possible so as to be ready for the fight. They were still a day's ride from the main city of Sarapta and he had done as much planning as possible until new intelligence came in.

He let his eyes wander over the countryside through which they were riding, enjoying the brilliant colors of late-blooming flowers. It was still warm; summers lasted a long time here. *This world, home without a name... adopted land that sheltered me and gave me peace....* He grew depressed at the thought of the natural beauty about to be despoiled by the aliens, the innocence to be lost, the ecology that would be destroyed. The planet would probably become just a number in the Empire record books, signifying nothing but an arid ball of dust.

Kirk reined his horse, and signaled a halt to the march. Behind him, he could hear the sounds of men easing themselves to the ground after a long ride and knew that, further back, foot soldiers were unlacing boots from sore, tired feet.

After informing the majori that this would be just a brief rest break, Kirk wandered away by himself. He needed time to be Kirk for a little while longer before he faced the enemy as Jankor, before he died as Jankor. *Strange, he mused, ever since I found Spock, I've gone back to thinking of myself as Jim Kirk again. Not Captain James T. Kirk -- that ache would never heal -- but as Jim Kirk, son of Earth....*

He had walked though a meadow and now found himself in a small wood. He paused, running his hands over the bark of a tree that was quite Earth-like. Without warning, a sudden, strange sound broke the stillness and interrupted his melancholia. Suspicious, he crouched down in the underbrush.

The sound came again, odd, but somehow familiar. Before Kirk could locate it, he heard footsteps and then, a few voices, pitched low.

The sound repeated and Kirk felt a chill of anticipation and dread. It was a metallic, technological sound, like nothing heard on this world before, made by some alien device, such as a tricorder or communicator.

He ducked further into the bushes, thinking furiously, weighing the odds of his getting caught versus the need to hurry back to warn his army of the Klingons' approach.

He saw them. Six -- no, eight of them came toward his hiding place. They wore military uniforms in a deep wine color, and sunlight glistened off gold braid on some of their sleeves. As one of them activated his monitoring device, the others paused and Kirk froze, knowing they had pinpointed his location.

His mind jerked into gear again as the bright sunlight glistened off something else. One of those approaching was blonde. On the heels of that realization, their voices were suddenly close enough for him to distinguish. *Standard?*

Kirk stood, gambling that even if they were unfriendly, it would be best to reveal himself rather than be shot trying to get away, and they spotted him. As they turned fully in his direction, he caught a view of Starfleet emblems on their tunics. Still hardly believing what he was seeing, Kirk swallowed a smile as one woman pulled out a device he recognized as a universal translator and passed it to her commanding officer.

"We come in peace." Kirk heard the words as garbled Atholian, mingled with an undercurrent of the same thing in his own language. "We're from the United Federation of Planets..."

It was real; it had happened at last. Blinking back tears of surprise and disbelief, Kirk contained his delayed reaction and stepped forward, speaking English. "Welcome..." he glanced at the officer's braid, "Captain...?"

The young man looked as shocked as Kirk. "Rogers, sir. Of the Starship Titan. Uh... you speak English?"

Kirk found himself enacting a scene he had given up as hopeless fantasy years ago. He extended his hand and spoke in a voice thick with relief. "I'm James Kirk." The others were gathering around now, exchanging looks of consternation, and to Kirk's surprise, recognition. *Perhaps not totally forgotten by Starfleet...?* "I was... Captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise. I've been marooned here for ten years."

"My God!" Captain Rogers marveled. "Captain Kirk... I don't believe it. You -- you've been believed dead... excuse me, sir, but..."

Kirk shrugged. "I'm sure that's what Starfleet thought. My First Officer and I were dropped off here by our Klingon captors, more dead than alive actually. Neither of us was capable of even figuring out where we were or what exactly happened. We'd been shifted around so much by our captors that we knew we'd be difficult to trace, and it certainly took the Federation long enough to discover this planet." He realized they were looking at him quizzically, that his tone was not exactly regulation. *Do all people who've been lost this long react so eccentrically when they're finally rescued?* "Better late than never, though. I assume you're aware of the other... visitors?"

"The Klingons, yes, sir." Rogers did not seem perturbed by Kirk's manner. "We're in orbit on the far side of the planet, keeping out of range of their sensors, so far."

Kirk caught himself smiling, remembering times he'd used that same tactic to hide from a Klingon ship. The culture shock was beginning to lessen as he spoke with Rogers; speaking English, relaying military data, realizing that there was a chance to come out of this alive after all had left Kirk feeling a little dazed.

Rapidly, he and Captain Rogers exchanged information. The Klingons had done battle with the Titan several weeks before, after attacking a nearby Federation outpost. Rogers was under orders to investigate Empire activities in this quadrant and the newly charted system, of which Kirk's planet was a part, seemed a likely candidate for attempted Klingon take-over.

In recent years, the Klingons had become even more vicious, killing large numbers or even whole populations of planets they captured and Rogers had been directed to stop them from taking this system.

Kirk briefed Rogers on the situation in Sarapta and discussed the plan he and his army had devised. Rogers decided to beam down a contingent of phaser-equipped troops disguised as Atholians to back them up. He would monitor the battle from his ship and give chase when the surprised Klingons attempted to escape. Kirk thought the plan had a chance to succeed. Though it was by no means certain that they would win now, at least the odds had evened considerably.

"You said something about your First Officer from the Enterprise being here with you?" Rogers asked.

"Yes, Mr. Spock. He's... in the Sarapta city." For a moment, Kirk let uncomfortable thoughts about Starfleet reaction to their activities here surface. "We became separated when the Klingons first left us here to die. Neither knew until a few months ago that the other had survived."

The young man looked thoughtful. "You know, somewhere in this mess must be some infractions of Starfleet regs, but I just don't have the time to figure it all out yet."

"I'm glad to hear that," Kirk was forced to admit. "You can see we were preparing for a fight and would be waging it even without your timely arrival."

"I know that. I can also see you've found your way into a position of power here." Rogers met Kirk's gaze steadily.

"Captain," Kirk addressed him, "we're on the same side in this. These people deserve their freedom. Spock and I owe them our lives. I hope you can just leave it at that for the time being. Klingon renegades half-killed us and took us away from our home, our careers, our whole way of life. We survived, made a new life for ourselves. It hasn't been the life we originally planned and it hasn't been without pain or sacrifice or guilt. I know I've never consciously tried to harm these people or change their culture. But as for this fight with the Klingons, it's as much for Spock and me as for the people of this world."

Rogers nodded. "I can see that, Captain, and I respect you for saying it. Your name is remembered in Starfleet. They looked for you for a long time. And just as you've changed by the fact of your having to survive here, you may find some changes in 'Fleet, too. We'll have to wait, though, to sort it all out."

Kirk smiled again. "I'm looking forward to the opportunity."



Sarapta was a conquered land. The dead lay where they had fallen in the dirt, an example left by the conquerors to those who lived. All their prowess in battle, all their courage against danger, even all their faith in the deities had not saved them. Sarapta was a quiet land, a land defeated.

Hidden away on the outskirts of the main city, a few souls still attempted to carry on the resistance. Though they had managed to blow up a few buildings and sabotage several operations, there had been too little time and an enemy that was too strong.

Yet, the Klingons had been angered and baffled by the tactics employed by the Sarapta freedom fighters. It had been only a matter of time for them to come to the conclusion that the natives were receiving Federation aid. The aliens searched night and day to put a stop to it.

Spock, surrounded by only a small number of his followers, was forced to keep constantly on the move. He had kept one step ahead of the Klingons for eight days, but he knew time was running out. More and more Sarapta were being killed. It was his duty to protect them as well as to keep the Klingons from traveling toward Atholos. Though the Vulcan couldn't know how long it would take Kirk's army to arrive, he had to do whatever he could to buy time.

It was evening. Gelbar, carrying a small bag of food, crawled through the camouflaged entrance to the cave where Maraden had hidden since morning.

"This was all I could get, my lord." He sank to the ground with exhaustion, indicating a few pieces of dried fruit and bread. "I did not wish to arouse suspicion."

Spock thanked his aide and half-heartedly chewed on a morsel of bread, "I'm sure they already suspect something, Gelbar."

"Indeed. They are most eager to find you."

"Have they made any progress today?"

"They learned your name, Maraden. And they have vowed to kill twenty hostages a day until you are located."

Spock let the crust of bread fall from his fingers. "I cannot let that happen."

Gelbar appeared shocked. "But how can you hope to prevent it?"

"By turning myself over to them."

"No!" The aide, forgetting his place entirely, clutched at Maraden's arm. "You cannot. They will destroy you -- and without you Sarapta is lost."

Spock disengaged his arm from the frantic hold. He spoke with a touch of irony that was lost on the Saraptan. "They will not kill me -- immediately. You must have faith, Gelbar. I have brought a message of peace to my people. I cannot let this killing go on." Briefly, sadly, he thought of the image of Surak going out to meet death for his beliefs on Yarnak's world. *I accept my destiny.* Spock's mind sent the words to the long-deceased father of Vulcan logic.

He stood, shaking the dust from his robes. Gelbar rose at his side, panic in his eyes, yet ready to follow the orders of the Seer. Spock swallowed the fear that rose despite his firm resolve. He hoped to slow the killing of his people until Kirk arrived, yet knew he could not hold out indefinitely. Old terrors, old hatred threatened to claim his sanity, and forcibly controlling his trembling was difficult. He turned to Gelbar.

"I must meditate. Wait for me outside."

With a nod, the aide left him alone. The words Spock had said to Kirk eight days ago came rushing back to him. *'I would prefer to die by your side.'* If that wish were not to be fulfilled, Spock hoped to at least buy Kirk's survival with his life.

Spock sank into a light, meditative state, attempting to rein his turbulent feelings. He needed to leash the anger and hatred that welled up in him against the Klingons; rather than mastering it, dispelling it, he could put it to constructive use. Yet he had no desire to let the violent emotions rule him. He needed all his control now, or he would be killed outright.

Just as the first stars rose above the ravaged land, Spock emerged from his hiding place. He gazed up at the stars' cold glare for a moment, then pulled his eyes away. The stars were his no more, he could no longer look to them for solace or escape. There were no longer even any dreams for him, no future, no peace.

"My lord?" Gelbar's voice brought Maraden out of his reverie. He turned to regard his aide.

"You are released from further duties." The words were grave, almost gentle.

Gelbar looked bewildered for a moment, then distressed. "My lord, I have served you for too many years to leave you now."

Spock inclined his head toward the man in almost a bow. "You have one final duty, then. Get word to the resistance. They are not to risk themselves to rescue me."

With that he turned and, before Gelbar could protest further, walked toward the Klingon encampment.



Morning in Sarapta, two days later, arrived with the unexpected chill that sometimes occurred late in the planet's summer season. The quiet that had settled over the main city did not lift with the dawn. The Klingon guards were still everywhere, the people waiting in their tents for something to happen.

In the plaza, the Seer Maraden stood tied to a crossbar on public display. He was heavily guarded and the Klingons had made it understood that if his rescue were attempted, the prisoner would be put to death immediately. The people had not grasped why the Klingons had been so delighted to learn of Maraden's pointed ears, and though it was distressing to

them, they did not comprehend their interest in his green blood. It had not been necessary to hurt him, even the warrior Sarapta believed a Seer above reproach. The Klingons spoke in words they could not understand; something about Maraden being as alien to their world as the conquerers. If the words were meant to rob them of their faith in Maraden, they did not. Of course the Seer was not of this earth, he was sent from the gods.

Now, in the early morning stillness, there was an air of anticipation. The people feared Maraden would soon be killed; the Klingons waited for the suspected starship crew to come and save the Vulcan.

The Klingon commander, Karev, walked slowly toward the bound prisoner. The Vulcan appeared exhausted; the interrogations had fatigued him, yet the natives' continued support seemed to keep him from breaking. After tying him in the plaza, stripped to the waist and criss-crossing his chest and arms with cuts so that it could be demonstrated that even his blood proved his difference from them, these ridiculous children did not falter. More would have to be killed before this land would be totally Karev's.

The Vulcan met Karev's eyes. At the banked defiance in them, the Klingon raised his arm and backhanded the prisoner. He knew they were being observed when from a distance came the sound of muffled weeping.

"I see your anger and resentment have multiplied during the night, Vulcan." Karev watched the fresh trickle of blood run down Spock's chin.

The prisoner strained at his bonds, his eyes flashing hatred. For a moment, it looked to Karev like all the famed logic and intelligence was gone from them, replaced by vindictive savagery.

"You'd like to get your hands on me, wouldn't you?" He smiled in anticipation. "Perhaps I will release you, so your 'followers' can watch you behave like an animal, so they can see you resort to physical retaliation toward us."

"They would relish the opportunity," Spock snarled. Then he drew a deep, calming breath and, with a strength that still amazed the Klingon, tightened his control, seeming to marshal both his dignity and his ferocity.

"No," Karev amended. "I will not grant your wish to become a martyr."

He turned toward the guards flanking the prisoner. "Gather the natives. I want them to watch his death."

His eyes came back to lock with the Vulcan's. "You have outlived your usefulness to me. I'm tired of fencing with you."

"I will become a martyr in whatever way I die." Spock's voice was cool, dispassionate.

"Their spirits will break when they realize you are no deity," Karev spat, becoming angry.

"I am not a god, but one who interprets the message of their deities," Spock corrected the Klingon once again.

"Semantics. It does not matter. Your time is up, Vulcan. Where is your underground? Where is your ship?"

"I told you, I have no ship, Klingon."

The Sarapta, gathered by the aliens, were beginning to fill the plaza.

"I should let you go under the mind-sifter one more time before I kill you," Karev decided suddenly. "There must be a way to break those barriers of yours."

Spock did not falter. "I told you, Karev, the last time I met some of your people, they themselves destroyed any way of having me affected by that device. They ripped out everything I already knew. I have no barriers against it, for none are needed."

Karev watched his prisoner closely, not sure if Spock were telling the truth. "We can try, anyway. There could be some interesting results..."

Before Spock could react to the threat, a sudden, whooping cry distracted the Klingon. The eyes of everyone in the plaza turned toward the sound.

High on the hillside overlooking the city, stood a row of Atholian horsemen in full battle dress. The *vadir's* war whoop came again, was taken up by his soldiers and reverberated down the valley. Then, the raised, bare arm of the Atholian leader dropped and at his signal, the warriors urged their horses on, descending toward the Sarapta capitol at full gallop.

Complete pandemonium broke out. None of the Sarapta were sure whether the raid was an attack by Atholos on them or on the Klingon invaders. The Klingons thought the raid would be easily stopped, and immediately began firing on the newcomers with disruptor weapons.

Still lashed to the pole, Spock struggled to get free, his exhausted body and mind snapping to full alertness. He could see Kirk riding straight toward him, ready to set him free. At the same instant, his eyes focused on Karev, aiming a disruptor at the charging Human.

"JIM!" Spock's cry thundered across the plaza.

The Klingon turned, caught off-guard by his prisoner's reaction. At that moment, Spock saw Kirk's hand come up, aiming a small object toward the alien.

Spock knew then that he was hallucinating. The brief contact he'd had with the mind-sifter yesterday had harmed him more than he'd thought, destroying the sanity he'd managed to patch back together. He knew he had to be imagining the red phaser streak that caught Karev, stunning the Klingon. Staggering, the alien turned, as if in slow motion, gaping at the charging rider, then whirled back to fire a bolt from his disruptor at Spock.

The blast caught the Vulcan in a moment of suspended consciousness. As sight and sound faded, the last unreal image he fantasized was of Kirk, using his phaser to flash Karev out of existence.



As the Klingon commander fell, Kirk started to leap down from his horse. He was grabbed by another vicious-looking alien and dragged to the ground. A brief pain lanced down his leg; he wasn't sure whether he'd been stabbed or if he'd fallen against something sharp, but he ignored the sensation. He struck the Klingon hard, knocking the unconscious body aside.

Kirk rushed to the Vulcan's aid, barely noticing the blood running down his own leg. He reached him in seconds, seeing the wounds that had been inflicted as he released him from his bonds and eased him down into a protective embrace. Spock's bare skin was cold in the chill morning air and for a moment, Kirk panicked. Even if a disruptor was only set on stun, it could kill if the victim were in a weakened condition.

Then Spock stirred in his arms, moaning, struggling. Kirk tried to still the frantic movements, all the while realizing the vulnerability of their position here in the open. He tried to lift Spock, to get him to a place of relative safety.

A few half-intelligible words came from the Vulcan's lips. Kirk bent close to hear.

"D-die... by your side..."

The Human stroked the hair back from Spock's forehead. "I'm here, Spock. Hold on. You're *not* going to die!"

"Jim... Jim..." The desperate sound of the voice told Kirk the Vulcan hadn't heard him, didn't realize Kirk was there.

"Oh, God, Spock. Not now..." Kirk trembled, aching to break through Spock's delirium. He bent over him as a disruptor blast splintered the wood of the pillar he'd been lashed to, causing it to fall over them. Holding him close, fearing he would slip away, Kirk felt a great, tearing pain in his heart, ripping him in two. He couldn't let go, couldn't lose Spock now, not when they'd come so far. Not when they had this chance before them....

"*Vadir?*" Kirk couldn't raise his head, couldn't respond to the title anymore.

"May I help you, *vadir*?" The voice repeated, sounding more urgent now. "Is my lord...?"

Kirk looked up. It was Gelbar, Spock's aide. The man looked dirty, disheveled as if he too had been through a lot in the last few days. Swallowing, trying to regain some composure, Kirk answered, "No. He's not dead -- yet. Help me get him to some shelter."



Kirk sat exhausted at Spock's bedside, too tired to sleep, too worried to attend to the duties that still awaited him outside the tent. The Vulcan had been unconscious for nearly three days now, and Kirk's concern was mounting hourly.

The battle had been swift and decisive. With the unexpected arrival of Federation troops, the Klingons had opted to retreat. Kirk and his people had those Klingons not killed or transported up to the fleeing ship in custody and, with the aid of the Titan crewmembers who had joined in the surface battle, waited for the starship to return.

Kirk's right leg ached and he reached down to tug at the bandage around his thigh. It wasn't a bad wound, but it did cause a little discomfort from time to time, especially when he was tired. And there had been little time for rest in the last days.

Kirk reached to caress Spock's flushed face, trying not to think about whether the Klingons had hurt his mind again.

Gelbar came in quietly, glancing toward Kirk, then looking at the man he still thought of as Maraden.

"No change," Kirk told him,

"I see."

"We won't know anything until he wakes up." Not for the first time, Kirk wished Rogers had sent more medical people down before the battle. The medics had been able to administer first aid to the casualties, but Spock required monitoring and more sophisticated care than they could provide. Kirk had no way of knowing how long it would be before the Titan could return, no way even of knowing how the battle had gone out there.

He found it difficult even visualizing the ship. A new vessel, built long after his career had been so abruptly terminated, she probably had all kinds of technical advances, perhaps only superficially resembled the Enterprise. The galaxy had gone on in his absence, he knew, yet the fact that he'd had no time to discuss changes or ask questions of Captain Rogers, what he didn't know about what had gone on in the Federation during the last ten years didn't really bother him.

He would learn everything in time, when the Titan returned. *If she returns. How ironic, if the Klingons destroy the Titan, I could very well be right back where I started.*

Suddenly needing to move, to do something, Kirk rose. "I have some things I must take

care of," he told Gelbar. He took a last, lingering look at Spock. "Let me know if he awakens -- if there's any change at all."



Kirk spent a few hours going over the casualty lists with the Titan officer in charge, helping Saraptas who had been hurt and displaced by the Klingons, seeing to his own troops, interrogating prisoners. It was all make-work, though. He felt a bit useless, like he'd used to when there was nothing to do aboard the Enterprise but paper work.

He had tried to learn more concerning what had been done to Spock. Kirk had discovered that Karev had indeed used a mind-sifter on him, but could not determine for how long or at which level. The Klingons had thought Spock was from a Federation ship, but apparently had learned nothing from him. Their interrogation had neither convinced them there was no ship nor had yielded information concerning the underground resistance. That news did little to calm Kirk's fears about Spock's condition however; the thought of the Vulcan undergoing such treatment again was appalling.

Kirk concluded his day at a gathering of his majori and some of Spock's officers who had survived. They all grudgingly admitted that peace between their nations would be mutually beneficial and agreed to open formal treaty discussions.

It had become well known now that Jankor knew Maraden, though many still did not possess any real understanding of the way the two had come to their world. Even after the arrival of the Klingon ships, they did not comprehend space travel or what an alien was. The natives seemed to think the Klingons were merely unfriendly gods who had tried to take their world away from the deities in which they believed. Even though Kirk tried to explain that both he and Maraden had also come from another, faraway world, it did not seem to matter to either the Sarapta or Atholians who they were. What the people did understand was the difference in nature between the Klingons and Kirk and Spock. They held those they still called Jankor and Maraden in even higher regard now than before.

Kirk let his thoughts drift, wondering briefly what it would be like to remain here, what it would mean to his life. Long ago, he had faced the reality of never again traveling the stars. He hardly dared contemplate the possibility now, and didn't want to set free the old wanderlust he had indulged so freely before. Yet, if the ship returned, he would be tempted... Hell, I won't have much choice. I'm sure Starfleet will want a full accounting of the last ten years.

Spock... what will become of you, now? The long days of not knowing were beginning to affect Kirk. His mind roved from one unpleasant possibility to another. Spock, still not out of danger, could not die. If he lived, he could be hopelessly brain-damaged. Spock needed medical help, the sooner the better.

Kirk forcibly halted the downward spiral into which his imagination was pulling him. The timely arrival of the starship was too good to be true, so hard to believe that his mind seemed determined to invent possible calamities to make up the difference.

Kirk left the gathering of soldiers and headed back toward Spock's tent. There was nothing more he could do but wait.

As he crossed the plaza, a sudden though well-remembered sound surprised him, lifting him out of his depression. It was Captain Rogers, along with a group of crewmembers, beaming down from the Titan.

"Kirk!" The Captain greeted him effusively, then sobered as Kirk came toward him. "You look awful, sir. What's wrong?"

Kirk smiled tiredly. "Just fatigue, Rogers. I'm damn glad to see you -- again." He nodded to the other officers whom he had met before with Rogers. "How'd it go up there?"

"They got in a few lucky shots, but we aren't damaged too badly. We chased them out of the quadrant, at least," Rogers summed up. "I've been in touch with my security chief here and I understand things are pretty well under control."

"Yes. What's next, then?" Kirk figured he had a pretty good idea.

"We're to leave a crew here to help the native population get back on their feet. Starfleet is thinking of assigning a permanent team, perhaps even a governor for a time. We still have the Klingon threat hanging over the whole system. Right now, we're heading back to Base as soon as possible. I informed Starfleet of your presence here." He looked around. "Where's Mister Spock?"

Kirk indicated in the direction of the chief priest's tent. "Over there. He needs medical attention right away."

Entering the tent, Kirk and the newly beamed-down doctor found a distraught Gelbar and an empty bed.

"I am sorry, *vadir*." The man came forward, obviously upset. "He woke up, very disoriented, almost worse than I've ever seen him. He called for -- you, I believe. 'Jim' is your name, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kirk's voice was low, agonized. "That's me. Where is he, Gelbar?"

"I could not stop him. I couldn't understand what he said. His words were strange to me."

"Damn, I should have been here." Kirk turned to Doctor Scolari, switching to standard and explaining briefly what the Klingons had done to Spock, during the invasion and ten years ago. "He's been unconscious since the raid, he may not even understand what's happened, that your ship is here. The Klingons ..."

At that word, Gelbar broke in. "I tried to explain to him about the Klingons, *vadir*, but I don't think he understood. He seemed... so sad, so desolate. He ran out of here, got on horseback and was gone."

"Damn." Kirk swore again, remembering the battle. Spock had been hit with the disruptor blast before Kirk could get to him. "He could even believe I'm dead. That'll put him over the edge." Kirk drew a deep breath; as he forcibly calmed, he thought of one place the Vulcan possibly could have gone. "Doctor, let me have your communicator." He took the strange, new wrist device and slipped it on, giving it a cursory glance to make sure he knew how it worked. "I think I know where to find him. Follow me with your kit. Use a tricorder to locate us if necessary. A Vulcan shouldn't be too hard to pinpoint." Kirk noted how the orders he barked out were not being questioned. "I'll call you if I run into any trouble or if he's not where I think he is. Otherwise -- let me be alone with him for a while. I'll call when I'm ready for assistance." Kirk turned then, striding past both Gelbar and the doctor, going straight to where his horse was tethered.

Spock was where Kirk thought he would be, on the same hillside where they had talked, and cried, together that morning now nearly two weeks ago. This time, however, the Vulcan was not slumped against a boulder as he had been when Kirk had found him before, nor was he in the agitated condition Gelbar had described.

He stood, his back to Kirk, staring down into a deep crevasse, as if concentrating on whether or not he should jump. Kirk feared calling out would be too startling, so he climbed up behind him quietly.

When he was close enough, Kirk realized Spock wasn't standing precisely on the edge, and he felt confident enough that speaking wouldn't off-balance him. Still, he spoke softly, not urgently, but with a sense of desperation.

"Spock?" There was a long, suspended instant of infinite wait in which Kirk became certain he couldn't deal with Spock's not knowing him again. Then, the Vulcan turned.

There was such a look of total emptiness there, the lines of pain carved deep, the eyes crying out the agony of a lost soul, that Kirk moved immediately to hold him.

The Vulcan slumped in his arms; Kirk eased him to the ground, sitting so that Spock could lean against him.

"We can go home now, Spock," Kirk began quietly. "The Klingons are gone. There's a Federation ship in orbit. We made it."

The haunted eyes looked up at him, a shaky hand touched his cheek. "I... saw you... with a phaser... not my imagination?"

Kirk smiled, shaking his head. "No. I happened upon the Fleet officers on my way into Sarapta. They were with us when we rode down that morning."

Spock seemed to digest the information. His expression turned vague, he seemed far away. Kirk began to worry again, to question gently.

"What is it, Spock? Why'd you come here? You shouldn't even be out of bed yet."

The words appeared hard to say. "I don't know. There was terror, a feeling of helpless rage inside me. That was the mind-sifter, I realize, but difficult to control. I didn't know where you were -- couldn't really believe I'd lived through it all."

"You did, Spock. Unbelievable as it seems, we both did."

"I think I realized that somehow as soon as I got out here."

Kirk's arms tightened around him. "You're all right, then."

Spock shook his head. "No. There are empty places." He rubbed at the back of his neck and across his eyes. "It hurts to think."

"I knew about the mind-sifter." Kirk was hesitant to ask. "How badly --?"

"They gained no information. I remember telling the commander that earlier Klingon attempts to destroy my mind had rendered the machine useless on me." He paused to catch his breath, his strength still not fully having returned. "That was... not precisely a lie."

Kirk looked at him intently. "The doctor from the ship is waiting for us, Spock. He can help you." The Vulcan did not respond. "We can go back now."

"Go back?"

Kirk glanced skyward; the sunset was just fading into gray. In his arms, Spock shuddered.

"That's our life back there, Spock. It was taken away from us and this will be our only chance to get it back. You deserve that chance and so do I. Besides, Starfleet's been informed we're here. I'm not saying we're being brought up on charges or anything, but we will have to report officially."

Spock eased himself out of Kirk's hold a little. "Jim... look at what I became here, how I affected these people. I don't know who I am. I don't know what's become of the Vulcan I was, or the scientist I used to be. Waging war against others, destroying lives. And -- I killed with my own hands." Kirk looked at him quizzically, and he explained. "One of my officers, Cadon, boasted that he had killed... you."

The raid on our outpost, when you came to see me... Kirk spoke gently now. "I became as involved with the culture here as you. We let the war become our own, fighting for another reason besides the Sarapta/Atholian land dispute. I admit that. But we did what we had to do, whether directed by logic or passion." He made sure the Vulcan was listening, then continued. "And since you told me about that officer of yours -- did you know I phasered the Klingon commander after seeing him shoot you with his disruptor?"

Spock favored Kirk with an unfathomable look, as if he wanted to be mollified by the shared confession, but couldn't accept the peace Kirk sought to give him.

"Something is different -- inside me, Jim," he said, touching his head. "Something is gone; they took it away..." He leaned over, holding his head in his hands. "I've been fighting this insanity so long."

Kirk felt helpless, not knowing if Spock's condition was emotional upset or brought on by the Klingon's abuse. He reached out, taking Spock by the shoulders, seeking to understand, fearing his understanding would not be enough.

"You know me, don't you, Spock. That fact and the way you handled the Klingons ought to prove how sane you are." Another thought occurred to Kirk. "You're not still feeling guilty for putting me out of your mind all those years?" He felt the muscles under his hands tense; he gripped Spock's shoulders tighter. "That's over now. I don't blame you for surviving. If you'd thought about my being tortured to death it would have killed you, wouldn't it?"

Spock looked up, his expression contrite. Kirk smiled at him fondly, almost teasing. "Then where would that leave me now? You lived, thank God, and we found our way back to each other."

The Vulcan met his eyes, probing, needing. Finally, he shook his head somewhat ruefully and Kirk noted the almost-smile. "I suppose that's logical."

Relief began to pour into Kirk's weary mind. He sighed deeply, his smile wider now. "Yes. It's logical." He hesitated, then began speaking earnestly.

"Spock, something kept you going here no matter how bad things got. Just as something kept me alive and fighting, too. It's the same thing that let you realize I was alive when you got up here on this hillside." The Vulcan's eyes had locked with his again. "It's true, Spock. Something held between us all these years, so light we never knew it was there, so much hurt covering it up we couldn't use it to find each other. But it's there." Spock nodded slowly and Kirk continued. "We were going to meld, that morning..."

Spock lifted his hand to Kirk's face, held it there a moment, then he let the hand fall. "I could still cause you pain. There was... so much damage."

"There's only one way to find out, Spock," Kirk urged. "Try. Please. For both of us."

Spock clenched his hands together, his eyes tightly closed.

"Think of it, Spock. Together. Think how good it could be, how safe, how right." The Vulcan looked up, uncertainty and need mingled in the turbulent brown eyes.

"Please, Spock. I believe I can help you." Kirk was whispering now, pleading. "You can do it. Let me help you."

Both of them were trembling by this time. As they moved closer, Spock's fingers traced Kirk's face, Kirk stroked Spock's hair. *Nearer, nearer, so right now, and so warm...*

They slipped into rapport together more easily than either would have supposed. Spock traced familiar pathways in Kirk's mind, fitting himself to well-known contours. They held thus for a while, simply relaxing in the comfortable mesh of minds.

See, I knew you could do it.

With your patience, your help.

Let me see you. Let me show you you're all right.

They moved on, needing to face the fears, the years of isolation. There were obvious wounds in the Vulcan's psyche, disturbances in the otherwise tranquil sea of his mind. At his shallow level, they were the recent bruises caused by the latest mind-sifter attack. Yet they had touched his emotions only, his control had been enough to preserve the intellect.

Like drifting on a lake, Kirk smoothed the waters with him. The waves crested, calmed, the turbulence diminished. Spock became again the controlled being he had been, yet the Human presence warmed the waters of his soul. The emotions remained in control, though nearer the surface, unafraid to be expressed.

Deeper then, they plunged together, braving the dark depths and dangerous currents that led to fear and madness. Their minds clung together, pulled down by the undertow, swirled into whirlpools, out into the sea of desperation.

There were no words to express what the Vulcan had undergone at the hands of the torturers. His mind had been so bombarded with pain and fear that his sanity had been in jeopardy.

Now, with Kirk, Spock could reach into himself, face what had happened and see that the damage was not irreparable. Indeed, a great deal of healing had already taken place. From the crazed, often delirious madman who had been found by a band of Sarapta youths had emerged the troubled visionary capable of leading his people.

The years of loneliness had been difficult, the realization that he had denied Kirk's existence a seeming betrayal. Yet, within the sphere of the Human's love and perseverance, Spock's spirit was recovering from the abuse it had taken.

Swimming together in now familiar waters, taking strong strokes toward a peaceful shore, they reached out, their minds a healing symbiosis. Kirk's pain too was bathed away, the steady strength of the Vulcan buoying him up as he had wished to do that night so long ago.

It was exhausting work, however, and they gradually realized that even a deep meld such as this could not mend everything all at once. Yet they could not bring themselves to draw apart so soon.

You are becoming tired, Jim.

Yes, but you feel better now.

I... wish we could have done this years ago. It would have strengthened us against the pain to come, might have helped us find each other. It just... hurt so much when we tried....

We must not regret that any more.

They drifted, resting, then moved closer, the meld deepening, probing, each learning to touch the other's very soul, each feeling an almost tangible ache of tenderness and joy.

Needed you... so much, Spock's thoughts warmed with astonished relief. So afraid... yet the very thing I feared...

... was what we both needed most. Kirk completed the thought, holding Spock ever closer.

Gradually, the realization dawned that they now had new hope, were on the threshold of new experiences, new challenges. The rapport grew more vibrant, building and reinforcing the fragile thread that had survived.

The waves crested, the link strengthened, entwining around their spirits, binding their once separate selves. The bond glowed with renewal, pulsed with power, the power of sharing, of mutual need and assurance. They drifted, slowly sinking ever deeper, until they reached the place where they could see and know and feel that it was love.

They floated back to corporeal reality so gently they barely felt the change. Opening his eyes, Kirk saw the lines of exhaustion had deepened on Spock's face. Kirk too was undeniably tired, yet incredibly fulfilled. They sagged forward into a clumsy embrace.

"Are you all right?" Kirk asked unnecessarily. He knew the answer, yet needed the words.

"Yes. I feel... whole again. What was gone, what I had lost, I have again. You're with me now."

With you, Kirk marvelled silently, here physically, as we are now, and more, held, supported, and comforted by your mind.

Look, Jim. Spock's words floated into his consciousness and he gazed upward, following the direction of Spock's eyes.



Suzanne '22

The stars were there, as brilliant in the night sky as they had ever looked from the bridge of the Enterprise, as bright as they had ever shone in his dreams.

"We've had too many years without them, Spock. Do you think we can go back?"

The Vulcan's voice was rich and deep with feeling. "I know we can do whatever we have to. And whatever we want."

Epilogue

Aboard the starship Titan, eight hours out of orbit, James Kirk stepped out of the sonic shower in his quarters. What he had once taken for granted as an enjoyable yet practical way of maintaining cleanliness now seemed odd and a bit barbaric. He had come to like the hot baths that were the custom back on the planet. They were relaxing in a way the sonic tingle could not possibly duplicate.

Towelling off, Kirk surveyed his frame in the full length mirror. Doctor Scolari had taken care of his most recent wound, the thigh injury he'd received the day of the raid. Later, Kirk knew he'd have time to remove the other scars, those that mapped the story of his life as Jankor. It wouldn't be vanity; they weren't disfiguring, yet without them he would truly be Kirk, man of the future, of the stars, again.

He had said good-bye to the world that had sheltered him, left the people who had come to trust and rely on him, the soldiers, the majori, even Theedra. As Norkor's niece, she alone was perhaps able to most nearly comprehend where he was going, how far and for how long.

Kirk dressed in the new regulation uniform and stepped quietly into the sleeping quarters. Spock still lay sprawled among the bedclothes, deeply asleep following another healing meld the two had shared. The Vulcan looked much improved, less haunted, more at peace.

The Human sighed, feeling nostalgic and yet looking speculatively toward the future. Back there, in Atholos, he had had a fairly decent life, as good as he thought he could get. Yet for ten years, it had meant nothing to him, not until he had found Spock alive. And here, whatever the future held, whether it turned out they still had careers to return to or not, life would have no meaning but for the fact that they had come through this together.

So many years, so many changes. I couldn't now be the captain I once was. I lost a lot of idealism along the way, added a few years, more scars than just the visible ones. It will remain to be seen whether the bitterness will outweigh the strength all this suffering is supposed to have imparted. No, I won't let myself be bitter now. I've changed, yes, and so has Spock, but we did survive. It's time to move on, to think forward for a while instead of always looking to the past, to regrets. Kirk decided to take a walk around the ship until Spock woke up, and quietly slipped out of the cabin.



A few hours later, Spock wandered the corridors of the starship, enjoying the odd-familiar sensation of movement through space. Beneath his feet, he could detect the engine's thrum and his eyes sought out and eagerly explored the intricacies of new developments.

He had awakened alone in the quarters he and Kirk had been assigned. The ship's doctor had pronounced him fit, though he indicated that Spock still required rest to fully recuperate from the severe effects of the Klingon disruptor stun. After the deep meld, the Vulcan had enjoyed a long, natural sleep and now new energy drove him to explore the ship.

He didn't worry about finding Kirk, knowing intuitively where the Human must have gone. Eventually, his wandering brought him to the observation deck of the great ship and he entered to find him.

Kirk was not aware of the Vulcan's presence, so enrapt was he in the panoramic view of space. He was held entranced again by the stars, his face aglow with their light.

Spock watched him fondly for a moment, not wishing to break the spell. Kirk was finding himself again here. It was obvious in his stance, his expression. His entire being was drawn along with the stars on this ride, captivated, intrigued, driven once again to learn their secrets and to master their dangers.

He was clothed in the new-style uniform worn here, the rich burgundy tunic setting off his sun-washed features, the soft fabric complimenting his physique. Spock half-smiled, remembering Kirk's appearance as it had been on the planet: bare-armed, booted, with armor breast plates, brocaded capes. *Not just a marooned star-farer, more like Alexander, the Vulcan mused, yet always the leader, any place, any time.*

He was drawn to move closer to Kirk, to reach out to him mentally and physically. At his approach, Kirk turned, greeting him with a warm smile. Spock laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Beautiful sight, isn't it, Spock?" There was nostalgia in the tone.

"An understatement." Spock looked directly at Kirk. "You are enjoying the view?"



Kirk sighed. "Yes. And thinking. About what it's going to be like now."

"You are concerned about meeting with Starfleet?"

"No. Not really. I spoke with Rogers while you were asleep. He told me that Fleet is planning mainly on questioning us about what happened with the Klingon renegades. They did not indicate there would be any charges brought concerning our activities on the planet."

"But there will be a full investigation."

"Looks that way," Kirk sighed philosophically. "A lot happened these past ten years. The circumstances under which we were forced to live..."

Spock's lips quirked into a smile. "I'm sure you will be able to explain our actions. I recall several times in the past..."

"The past -- I hope it doesn't catch up with me now." Kirk returned his gaze to the stars for a moment, sobering. "In a way, I kind of feel like we're going back in time. I wonder if we can recapture all the years we lost, if we should even try."

Spock let his fingers slide through the freshly trimmed hair along Kirk's nape. "I do not believe it is a matter of going back. The time was not totally wasted. We both learned much."

"It did rather interrupt our careers, though." Kirk spoke wryly.

"I look forward to whatever the future holds..." Spock hesitated a moment, then dared to use a word unspoken for too long, "Captain."

Kirk turned to meet his eyes. "Thank you, Spock. Maybe even that will be possible again." Their eyes held for a few moments, the mental link supportive and complete. "But there are many possibilities. Rogers says the Federation may assign a governor to the planet."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "And who would be better qualified than you to fill such a position?"

Kirk grinned. "I'd need some help, of course."

Spock's voice resumed a serious note. "I would not be surprised if you were indeed offered the position."

"We could do some good there. Without us, things could get chaotic again. You know," Kirk sighed, "I kind of miss it. That place was... home for quite a while."

"Indeed. I, too, felt an affinity for the land."

"Doesn't even have a name."

"Planets are sometimes named for the first to discover them."

Kirk looked at him sideways. "Are you teasing me, Spock?"

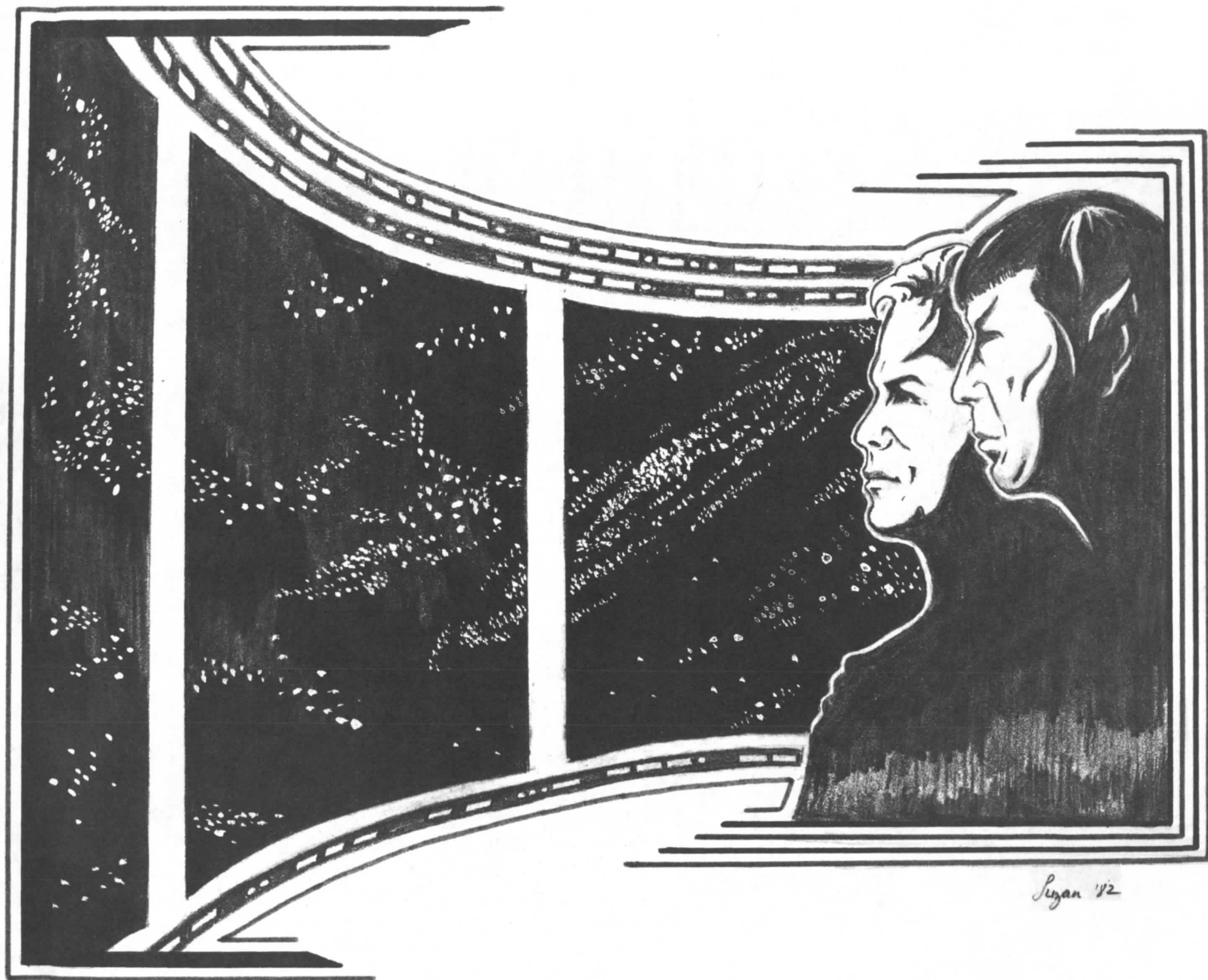
"Never."

Kirk snorted. "Right."

They stood quietly for a moment, their thoughts intermingling, drifted across time and space, back to the planet they had left, the lives that had touched theirs there; and outward, toward the stars, the past adventures and coming challenges.

Kirk leaned back against Spock as the Vulcan's arm slid around his shoulders.

"God, this feels good," the Human whispered, not elaborating on whether he meant the embrace or the new beginning.



Lujan '82

Kirk's thoughts wandered with the passing stars, sailing far away, yet remaining ever near the Vulcan at his side. Their new intimacy within the link was comforting, strengthening to both of them. Kirk knew there would be difficult days ahead, challenges, compromises, decisions. The broken pieces of life could never be refitted exactly as they once were. It was hard not to feel cheated, even after all this time. Yet, they had each other and together, tomorrow was worth waiting for.

"Do you ever think about the Enterprise, Spock?" Kirk's voice was dreamy, far away.

"Yes. For a long time she... haunted my dreams. When I found you again, my thoughts returned to her." The Vulcan hesitated. "Have you learned anything...?"

"No. Not really," Kirk cut in quickly. "I've been a little reluctant to ask questions. She's still out there, I know that much. Someday..." he faltered, swallowing the catch that had crept into his voice, "someday I'd like to see her again."

"Of course."

"So many good times," Kirk whispered. "So many friends. Damn. I want to see McCoy."

Spock held him more securely. "You will. There will be time enough for everything."

Kirk turned to look into the Vulcan's eyes. "We can't be sure of that. Wouldn't it be ironic if --"

"No. Do not speak of such things."

"Superstitious, Spock?" Kirk said it with just a trace of sarcasm.

Spock remained serious, emphatic. "There will be time. Trust me. I know."

"Now you're predicting the future?"

The eyebrow rose again. "You are speaking to Maraden, First Seer and chief priest of the Sarapta. I know the will of the gods."

"I see." Kirk bowed his head deferentially. "I stand corrected."

"I would, however," Spock went on, "not be adverse to being your First Officer once again."

Kirk smiled, a full, true, relaxed smile this time. "That just might be, Mr. Spock." He waved in the direction of the flowing starfield. "We did make it back out here, after all."

The two stood watching the brilliant, cascading light a few moments longer, then, arms still around each other, they turned to leave the Observation Deck.

The empty, lonely years behind them now, they moved together back among the stars they shared.

